The Broncho Rider Boys at Keystone Ranch

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To
Kenneth Warren
From
David Rainey.

December 1924.

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Wagon Wheel Dude Ranch
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McLOUD, OKLAHOMA

Bending over as he rode, Billy sent a bullet at the dangling mass of gray depravity. *Page 9.*

The Broncho Rider Boys at Keystone Ranch.

The Broncho Rider Boys At Keystone Ranch

OR

Three Chums of the Saddle and Lariat

By FRANK FOWLER

Author of

"The Broncho Rider Boys On the Wyoming Trail,"
"The Broncho Rider Boys Down in Arizona,"
"The Bronco Rider Boys Along the Border,"

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THE BRONCHO RIDER BOYS
AT KEYSTONE RANCH

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CHAPTER I.

ROPING A WOLF.

"PULL up, Billie, a bit!"

"Why, what's the matter now, Don?"

"I thought I saw something moving over yonder, just by that bunch of purple sage brush!"

"A man, or a wolf, or an antelope, Don?"

"Wait! There it is again, and now you can see as plain as anything what it is."

"Yes, and the biggest gray wolf I ever set eyes on, too. He's sure seen us, and is trying to slink away, I reckon, eh, Don?"

"That's right, for he has hidden again behind the sage," continued the boy whom his companion had called Don, as he pointed with his cow puncher quirt, which was hung to his wrist, though seldom used upon the mettlesome broncho he rode. "And I say, Billie, here's luck for us; because that slick prairie pirate looks like the thief the boys all call Old Calamity, and would give a week's wages to knock over, any day. Let's chase after him!"

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"What, could we beat a scared wolf on the run, then, do you think, Don?" asked the second lad, a heavily built chap, who was evidently not so much at home in the saddle as Don, though a fair rider for one of his ungainly bulk.

"Oh; we often do that, if there happens to be a wide stretch of open country to keep up the chase in. Roping a wolf is the cowboy's best sport, and he never lets one get away if he can help it; because they are the enemies of the young calves on the range. But for two years, now, there's been an old rascal who's cost dad a heap of money; and every time we've started a hunt, just to round him up, why, he always slips through the lines and gets to some coulie where we lose him. We've had a standing reward of fifty dollars out for the hide of Old Calamity, this past year and more; but no puncher has ever claimed it as yet."

"Whew! and you think that's the old sinner right now, watching us out of that sage brush?" Billie went on—among his schoolmates away back in South Carolina, in a spirit of fun he had once been called Wee Willie Winkle, just because he was so big, and fat, and overgrown; by degrees this had been corrupted into Little Billie; and since coming out to his uncle's cattle ranch on the western border of New Mexico, and showing that he could ride fairly well, his cousin Don had started in to dub him Broncho Billie, a name he seemed to take great pride in.

"I'm pretty sure of it," Don went on; "and

what's more, it looked to me as if the four-footed thief of the herds was limping, when I glimpsed him just sneaking into that brush. If we've caught Old Calamity away out here on the open, and with a cactus thorn in his foot, we're in great luck, let me tell you. Come on, Billie, let's head that way; and get ready for a warm dash, too!"

"I wish Adrian was along right now, to share in the fun!" remarked the stout Southern lad, as he dug his heels into the sides of his pony, and kept along with the son of the proprietor of Keystone Ranch, Donald Mackay.

"So do I," returned the other, over his shoulder, as he started swiftly in the direction of the suspected spot; "but just because it's the notorious Old Calamity we've stirred up; for, you know, Adrian has run out many a common wolf and kiote since he's been with us here. Hello! just as I expected, the sly scamp has guessed we must have sighted him, and that only his speed can save him now. There he goes like a scared rabbit. Now show what you can do, Wireless," and he once more dug his heels into the sides of his galloping broncho.

These two lads, together with the absent chum, Adrian Sherwood, seemed to fairly live on the backs of their ponies, and it had become quite a common thing among the cow punchers on the Keystone Ranch, as well as neighboring places, to refer to them as the "Broncho Rider Boys;" indeed, every one knew who was meant the moment the phrase

was used; and Billie in particular was very proud of being allowed to share in the honor.

He had been given a very handsome pony by his uncle, but as yet could not say that he had mastered the buckskin beast, though once he had stayed as long as *six minutes* on his back, while the vicious animal bucked, and carried on like a crazy thing, and finally landed his ambitious master on his back in the duck pond.

But Billie was fully determined that some fine day he would win out; and every little while he would start at the job again, only to meet with another reverse. It was a wonder that he did not get his neck broken; and more than once his uncle regretted having allowed him to call Jupiter his property; but as a rule they did not let Mr. Mackay know one quarter of the sad experiences which Billie passed through in his stubborn resolution to conquer the wild broncho. And so up to now it was a drawn battle between them, with Billie as set in his way as ever.

The pony Billie now rode was a well behaved one called Maudie, that had served some cowman for a year and more, and could be depended on to " play the game " to the limit; having been taught to lie down at command, and do a variety of common tricks, such as giving warning to the sleeping " wrangler " of the saddle band of horses, at the approach of danger. But Billie would never be happy until he had conquered that fiery spirit in the

handsome Jupiter, and made him recognize a master in the boy who now owned him.

Billie's father was a Methodist minister, while his grandfather had been a fire-eating Confederate Colonel during the war between the States. From one he had inherited a peaceful disposition; and yet there were times, Billie asserted, when he believed he could feel the spirit of his soldier ancestor rising up within, and urging him to be a credit to the Winkle family. At such times he would put on what he called his "fighting face;" and those who saw him always declared they did not know whether to be frightened, or burst into laughter, he looked so fierce, and yet so comical.

Billie's folks were now living in New York State, and had sent the boy out to spend a year or so with his cousin Don, partly in the hope that such exercise as he would naturally indulge in on the range might reduce his flesh, and make him a healthier lad. And Billie was reporting with every letter that his muscles were hardening wonderfully, while he continued to lose weight at the rate of a pound a week; but if this were so one could not help wondering what he must have looked like when he first came to Keystone Ranch, three months back.

When the two boys coaxed their ponies to stretch out at full speed it could be seen that they were rapidly overtaking the fugitive wolf. The alarmed beast seemed to be making desperate efforts to keep ahead long enough to reach the shelter of the rougher country a couple of miles or more beyond;

but what Don's sharp eyes had detected was the truth, and the wolf was suffering from a lame foot, for occasionally he could be seen to show signs of a decided limp, that undoubtedly affected his natural speed.

At any rate, the riders were now rapidly overtaking him, and already Don had his lariat in hand, ready to send the whirling coils out when within throwing distance. Don Mackay had few equals at this sort of thing, and there was not a cowboy in the country who could beat him when it came to displaying a wonderful knack in using the rope. He could perform all manner of tricks with the same; and was continually learning something new, with which to astonish and delight his chums, Billie and Adrian.

It would have pleased Billie more than words could tell had he been able to use his rope one half as well as his cousin; he practiced faithfully, but somehow did not seem to be able to just get the proper "swing." It might be that his weight and natural clumsiness were against him; for considerable agility is needed, if one expects to become a thorough cowboy, and up in all the branches of the business.

"Let me wind him up, after you've roped him, Don, please!" he called out, as he saw the other getting ready to rise in the stirrups, preparatory to whirling the gathered coils of the rope around his head.

Don made no reply, for just at that instant he

launched his lariat after the fleeing wolf. Had the cunning beast been able to look over his shoulder, and speed at the same time, possibly he might have ducked, and avoided the descending noose; they did see him try to dodge a little, as though he might have heard the hiss of the flying rope; but it was too late, and Don had calculated to a nicety.

Another instant and the wolf was in the toils, the noose tightened, there was one sharp yelp, and the next thing Billie knew, the captured beast was being dragged at the heels of the snorting Wireless.

Now was Billie's turn; and drawing his gun he fell back so as to get close up to the wretched wolf, which was being whirled along so fast that one could only distinguish a flickering gray hide.

At any rate Billie had inherited some of his grandfather's love for firearms, and could shoot as well as the next one. Bending over as he rode, and trying to hold Maudie with one hand on the bridle, he watched until he had the right chance, when he sent a bullet at the dangling mass of gray hair and yelps and wolfish depravity.

"Get him?" shrilled Don, easing up in his mad gallop as he spoke.

"Sure thing!" answered Billie, whose pony was executing a war dance just then, as a wind-up to the exciting chase.

That was one little fault of the cow pony, and which she could not overcome, even in her old age—at the sound of firearms she would try to

stand on her head, so it seemed; and the smell of burnt powder made her buck, and prance like Jupiter himself.

Now Billie had prepared himself against being unseated by some such evolutions as these; but he certainly could not have anticipated that the pony would, while performing, thrust her forefeet through into the burrow of a gopher.

And when this happened so unexpectedly of course poor Billie was sent flying over her head, turning a complete somersault in the air, and landing with a heavy thump in a sitting position, some ten feet beyond.

It was rather an inglorious termination of the brilliant chase after the wolf, and the successful slaying of the pest of the range.

CHAPTER II.

A KIND ACT REWARDED.

"Not hurt, I hope, Billie?" called Don, as he swung around so as to approach the spot where his chum sat, looking astonished at his sudden transportation from a saddle to the hard ground.

"N—no, not much, I reckon, Don; though it did give me a sort of jar, you know. When I come down you c'n feel the earth tremble some, they say. But look out, Don, there's a nasty rattler coiled, and whirring his box at you. Perhaps he meant to give me a knock if I fell near him. See him just in front of the open door to that other gopher hole? Say, he's a jim dandy, ain't he, though? Clip his head off, won't you, Don; my hand's too unsteady, after that tumble, to do the business for him."

And the other, jumping from the back of his restless pony, immediately did just as he was asked. His bullet went accurately to the spot, and the head of the angry rattlesnake was taken off as neatly as though a knife had done the job.

"They're ugly venomous little crawlers," Don went on to say, after he had seen that his work had been well done; "and sometimes I think they remind me of Clement Derring, who has been act-

ing like a snake in the grass toward me these two years and more, ever since we had that row, after I beat him with rope, saddle and gun, at the cowboy meet, where all sorts of games are carried out. And he's never stopped trying to get even with me up to this day. Then again, I feel like apologizing to the first rattler I meet for insulting it; because, say what you will, the snake is honest, and never strikes without giving warning; which is more than Clement will do. But you seem to be feeling yourself all over, Billie; no ribs broken, are there? Get up, and jump around a little; that'll tell you if there's anything wrong."

"Oh! I'm as fit as a fiddle string, Don; a little tumble like that ain't going to bother *me*. You see, ever since I've been tussling with that stubborn Jupiter I'm getting so used to being tossed, that by now I know just how to land without standing on my head. And Nature looked out to make sitting down an easy thing for me. But how about the wolf?"

"Dead as a door nail, Billie; you gave him his finish, and it was a clever shot, when you remember that a pony is always fidgeting, more or less, at best," was the cheerful answer Don made.

"Have you looked him over yet, and is it Old Calamity?" continued the other, as he climbed to his feet, and started toward the spot where his pony stood, looking as meek as a lamb, as though that stumble had taken all the friskiness out of her.

"Oh! I knew that all along; and I'll show you

some of the scars that go to prove, it; because the old rascal has had many a narrow escape in his time," and Don, as he spoke dropped the bridle of his broncho over its head, so that it trailed on the ground, which is almost as good as hitching a thoroughly educated cow pony.

Together the two boys strode over to where the wolf lay motionless at the end of Don's lariat. Billie noted how cleverly the loop had been dropped, so as to trip the running beast, and hold him fast, while the ponly started on a new tack, and dragged him off his feet. He also saw with pardonable pride where his bullet had struck; it was a good shot, just as Don had so loyally declared.

"Here's where he came near going under," remarked the cowboy, pointing to where the harsh gray hair was missing along the side of the dead wolf. "I remember when Sandy Marsh gave him that shot, just before he disappeared in the coulie last winter. We saw him roll over, noted the red streak on his side; then he got up, and with his never-say-die way jumped into the brush at the foot of the tumble-down rocks; and though we hunted for hours we couldn't find where his hole was. And if you look close, you'll find a dozen scars on his hide, because he's an old hand, and has been in all sorts of fights in his day."

"Well, let's shake hands on it, Don," observed the fat boy, cheerfully; "because it's what you might call a great day's work, when you can say you've knocked over such a troublesome visitor as

this Old Calamity. Mebbe the boys won't yell when you show 'em his hide? And there'll be more'n a few calves live to grow up into beef, than if you hadn't just been lucky enough to sight him topping the rise by that bunch of sage."

"Yes, and dad'll be right glad of it too, I give you my word, Billie," ventured Don, as he stood there idly slapping his chaps with his quirt, cowboy fashion, and looking down at the gray terror that, for several years, had defied all efforts to put a stop to his raids on the young calves of the feeding herds on the range. "By degrees we seem to be getting rid of most of these prowlers around here, and when the next Spring round-up comes along I look to see a big increase in the herds. A calf now and then may not count for much; but feed a single wolf a year, and see what it costs you."

"But do you always have another round-up in the early Fall, like that they're getting ready for now?" asked Billie, eagerly; for he had never taken part in one of these exciting events, and for some time had been looking forward with delight to having a share in the work of the outfit.

"No, but this year dad has a reason for wanting to reckon up the size of his holdings on Keystone Ranch," replied Don, as he bent over, and removed his rope from the body of the dead wolf; after which he took his knife from its leather sheath, and started to remove the hide, with a dexterity that told of considerable skill.

Don was dressed in the ordinary garb of a cowboy, even to the fringed and decorated leather "chaps." Some of his father's employees liked the sheepskin overalls best; but somehow Don had never fancied them. Besides, he had all a true cowboy's dislike for the humble occupation of a sheep herder's uneventful life; and for this reason if no other, would never wear anything that suggested a connection with it. There has always been much bitterness shown between the cowmen and the sheep herders; each accusing the other class of encroaching on their preserves; and in times past battles have even been fought over this disputed subject, sometimes with fatal results.

Don had gone about his work so rapidly and deftly that the hide of the wolf was soon removed. And it was just at this time that Billie, who had been watching the operation intently, broke in with an exclamation.

"Hi! look here what's coming this way, Don! Looks like Indians; and didn't one of the boys at the home camp say something about the Indians being off their reservation? Think we'd better get ready to stand 'em off, Don?"

At that the other burst out into a laugh.

"Well, you *are* an innocent, Billie!" he remarked.

"In what way?" demanded the stout boy, looking a little sheepish; "they are reds, aint they, all right; or am I seein' things I hadn't ought to?"

"Oh! they're Indians, all good enough; but the

Wagon Wheel Dude Ranch
"A PRIVATE

one on the horse is a squaw; and the brave, he's driving. You notice that they've got drag poles hitched to the cayuse, and on them are piled all they own in the world. Yes, and as sure as you live, there's a pappoose bundled up with the lot. That Indian is on the jump, moving from one place to another. Man and horse look tired too; and I reckon they'll have a heap of ground to cover before night sets in.

"The squaw looks hungry, Don," remarked Billie, who was really a tender-hearted boy, and could feel for those who suffered.

"Wouldn't be surprised if she was," Don pursued; "and I know what's passing through your mind right now, Billie."

"Let's see if you do," dared the other, immediately, yet with a whimsical smile that always amused his cousin, it was so utterly good-natured and attractive.

"Well, we knocked over several big rabbits awhile back, you remember," suggested Don, jerking his thumb over toward his horse, where the bunnies were dangling, being tied by the hind legs; "three, all told, and pretty fine shooting from the saddle, if I do say it that shouldn't. And as we've had so much stew that you don't care for it any longer, why, it just flashed through your head that we could get rid of the game, and be doing a kind deed at the same time. How's that, Billie?"

"Oh! you're a mind reader, that's what, Don!" exclaimed the other, "because that is just what I

had in mind. Hope there's no objection to doing it?"

"None from me, son; for all I care about them, you could give away every jack rabbit ever shot on the range. And the Indians will be glad to have 'em, too. Wait till I make the high sign; and he'll turn this way. He's looking at us a little uneasy like, right now."

So saying, the son of the cattleman who owned the big ranch made a certain gesture with his right hand, after which he held both palms up, and turned toward the Comanche. It was the universal "peace sign," seemingly known to every savage tribe and people on the face of the earth.

The Indian now came toward them, and seemed no longer afraid. When anyone made that free masonry sign they might be trusted, he believed.

"Now, what takes the Commanche brave so far on the trail of the plain and desert?" asked Don, who knew how to deal with Indians, for he had been acquainted with the species ever since he could remember.

"Spotted Horse have old father in mountains, not come to reservation—hear him much sick, ask for Spotted Elk; so take squaw, pappoose, and set out visit same. Much days on trail now, game scarce, eat dry deer meat, hard time right long. White boy sell rabbit, heap thank!"

"There!" ejaculated Billie, exultantly, "what did I say, Don? Tell the buck he's welcome to the whole outfit, three fat bunnies; and we hope they'll

help to see him through to the hills. And we don't want a cent of pay for the same, either."

As Don slung the trio of long-legged rabbits over to the Indian, the black eyes of Spotted Horse danced with satisfaction; even the squaw looked her thanks, though it was not her place to say a word, while her lord and master was by.

"Heap fine white boys give fat game. Spotted Horse, him 'member. Some day, mebbe him do same by paleface. Not forget. Tell name, so can know;" he went on to say, in his half broken way.

No sooner had Don mentioned their names than the Indian gave immediate indications of excitement.

"You him, Don Mackay—big white man own ranch, call Keystone? Ugh! much good we meet. Spotted Horse tell what know, Don feel glad stop give poor Indian rabbit."

He took Don aside, and began to pour a string of words into his ear. Billie was by this time considerably excited. He could not hear much that was said, nor was he able to understand the little that drifted to his ears; but he could see that his cousin appeared to be greatly annoyed, and that he was questioning the friendly Comanche eagerly. All of which, it may be set down as certain, aroused Billie's curiosity to the utmost pitch, and made him fairly burn to know what it all meant.

CHAPTER III.

OVER THE ALKALI PLAIN.

"WHAT'S it all about, Don? You look like you could bite a nail in half. Now, in the name of goodness, how could what that poor wandering Indian have to tell you make you frown so?"

Broncho Billie said this after the Comanche brave had urged his horse to move along, waving his brown hand toward them as a last salute, and a means of wireless, to signify his thanks for their bounty, and those splendid jack rabbits that would afford his family several good meals.

"Well, you see," Don went on to say, "he happened to have heard my name mentioned just lately; and in such a way that, after meeting us here, and being treated so brotherly by us, he just thought it his duty to tell me all about it."

"And now you're going to pass the news along to me; is that it?" demanded the other, expectantly.

"It seems that on his way to the mountains to see his old father before the hide-out Indian was taken away by death, Spotted Horse passed through Morgantown; and while hanging out there, while his squaw tried to sell some beadwork, and baskets

they had along, he heard a white boy talking with Rolfe Perkins, whom the Indian chanced to know as an all-round bad man. He didn't pay much attention to what they were talking so earnestly about; but when they came to separate he heard the boy say plainly, and with all the ugliness he could stir up; 'Get that Don Mackay cur, and the money's yours, Perkins!'"

"Whew! you don't say!" exclaimed Billie, whistling at the same time, as though his feeling were too deep for words, and he had to find some other escape valve.

"Well, I asked him a few questions, and he described that boy to me," continued Don, between his teeth. "An Indian notices everything at a glance, and he told enough to convince me that, just as I might have expected, the fellow who had mentioned my name to that bad man was Clement Derring, whose father owns the Double D. Ranch, ten miles from here, and is also a rich mine prospector."

"But what could he mean by telling Rolfe Perkins to *get* you, Don?" demanded Billie.

"Well, I can only give a guess at that," answered Don. "Rolfe has a reputation for being a hard case around this section; and most cowmen avoid getting mixed up in trouble with him and his breed. He runs with a hard crowd, some of which rustle cattle for Colonel Derring. At the same time he knows my father, and has managed to keep away from our camps. Still, money will tempt such a man to take chances, and when a boy is as mean

as Clement Derring I reckon he'd bribe anybody to carry out some scheme of his, no matter what it cost. He's a chip of the old block, my dad says; and everybody knows what Colonel Derring has always been. He's hated worse than any three other men in the county."

"Oh! if only Spotted Horse had kept his ears open in the beginning," said Billie, plaintively; "he might have heard the whole thing, and could have told us all about it. And now you only know that there's some sort of a move on foot, to do you an injury, without the least idea what shape it's going to come in."

"Then the only way is to keep on the watch right along, and be ready to nip any little game in the bud," said Don, trying to forget that he had shown anxiety.

"And Don, after this you'd better not take to riding around the country alone, d'ye hear?" the stout boy went on to say, impressively.

"That's so; and the first thing I'll do will be to engage Broncho Billie to go with me from now on," Don hastened to remark, half humorously; but his chum did not see anything to laugh at in the situation.

"Yes, and our friend Adrian in the bargain; don't they all call us the Broncho Rider Boys; if I am pretty much of a tenderfoot yet, and can't even say that I've conquered a bucking pony. But just wait, either that Jupiter has got to knuckle under, or else break my neck; for I'll never, never give up

my job, as long as the sun rises in the east, and sets in the west!"

"Hurrah! that's the ticket, Billie!" cried Don, slapping his comrade heavily on the back, so as to make him stagger; "true grit like that will always tell in the end. Nature didn't mean you for a cowboy; but you may get there all the same, believe me!"

"And Don, just think, I lost a whole pound last week, sure I did!" exclaimed the other, enthusiastically, as though that meant a great deal, when everybody kept joking him on his ponderous size for a boy, and seemed astonished that he was able to stick to a horse at all, much less do stunts that would well become a more agile rider.

"Well, here's our wolf-skin, which I've rolled up," observed Don. "Every fellow on the ranch will agree with me that this is the very last of our long detested enemy, Old Calamity; and they'll be glad of the news at that. This will be a feather in our caps, Billie."

"Yours, you mean, Don; for didn't you discover him, first of all; and wasn't it your rope that corraled him?"

"Say, none of that kind of talk; remember, from this time out," warned the other, shaking his forefinger in Billie's face. "Whose lead snuffed his life out, tell me? It's got to be a joint stock affair, from the word go. I won't hear of anything else, understand!"

"That's just like you, Don!" insinuated the

other, but with a touch of sincere affection in his voice. "Who could help being fond of a fellow who's as generous—"

"Please let up on that, Billie, and pay attention to what I'm saying," Don went on to say, for flattery of any sort always confused him. "Now, I've tied the hide to my saddle, and when I get the whole bunch of boys together, I'm going to just open the same, and fling it down before them without even a word. Then listen to what a shout goes up, when they see the enormous size; and get on to some of the marks the skin carries."

"But why do they call him Old Calamity?" asked Billie, always ready to soak in information of every sort, when the chance offered.

"I never heard just why, but sure there's been something like calamity whenever this cunning old thief ever visited a ranch, or crept near cattle feeding on the range. Cows and bulls will generally keep ordinary wolves at a distance; but they were always fooled, somehow or other, by this sly dodger. He'd get his dinner in spite of everything. Why, we've even caught him at it, making off with a fat calf thrown over his shoulder. Of course he'd drop his game, and run for it; but up to now all our chasing did no good, except to show us that we had a crafty sinner up against us."

"Then shall we mount again, and turn back toward home?" asked Billie.

"Might as well, as we've had fun enough for one day, seems to me," Don observed.

"Suits me, because I've got an engagement, you know, and one I don't like to break, if I can help it," was what Don said, with a shrewd wink.

"I reckon that means you feel you've just *got* to take chances with your neck again, trying to get the better of that imp of darkness, the buckskin broncho, Jupiter!" Don went on to remark, shaking his head, as though he did not wholly approve of the fat boy persisting in his endeavor to break the spirit of the balky and ugly tempered pony, that had never up to now known a master.

"Well, it serves to kill time, you know," Billie remarked, with a chuckle.

"So long as it isn't you, I'm satisfied," his cousin went on to say, soberly.

There being nothing more to detain them, they threw themselves into their saddles—that is, Don did, while the more weighty one of the pair climbed laboriously up, with pretty much of an effort. But once Billie was seated he seemed to be a part of his pony, which at times might be said to fairly groan under his weight.

"Which way is home?" asked the tenderfoot; for although Billie had been several months now upon the alkali plains bordering the desert that lay between Keystone Ranch, and the far off mountains, he was particularly lacking in his bump of locality, and apt to get lost upon the slightest excuse, once he found himself out of sight of the white buildings that marked the home ranch.

Don, without the slightest hesitation, pointed directly into the northeast.

"Straight away yonder they lie," he said, as positively as though he could see the cluster of low houses nestling there right at that moment; when in reality, as far as the eye roamed nothing was to be discovered but the never ending plain, with its little ridges that were covered with purple sage; or it might be, sand-crowned low hills, outposts of the nearby desert.

They galloped along for some time, and finally even Billie could distinguish the far off signs of buildings and trees.

Twenty minutes later and Don uttered an exclamation, as though his keen eyes had discovered something of unusual interest.

"There's some one galloping this way like the wind," he remarked, "and seems to me I ought to know that speckled pony, as well as the way the rider sits the saddle. Yes, it's our chum Adrian, on Ten Spot. He must be feeling a heap better than when we started out, and has come to meet us."

"But what's he flinging up his hat that way for, Don?" questioned Billie, presently. "I never saw Adrian carry on like that before. Look, would you! There, he's beckoning us to hurry on, and meet him half way. Perhaps he's bringing news of some sort, Don. Oh! I hope nothing has happened to your father, my Uncle Gordon!"

"My father is away on business, that's so," com-

mented Don, himself turning pale for the moment, and then refusing to believe that it could mean so serious a thing, he went on to say: "Oh! it isn't that, Billie, don't think it. Perhaps one of the boys has broken an arm, and they want me to set it; because, you know, I'm looked on as the regular ranch doctor these days."

"Anyway, we'll soon know," declared the other, as he dug his heels into the sides of his pony, to urge the already tired animal on faster.

Five minutes later and they came together. Adrian was a boy very much after the type of his chum Don, and dressed in real cowboy style in the bargain; for much of his young life had been spent in the Wild West among stirring scenes.

"What's the matter, Adrian?" called Don, as soon as they drew near enough to exchange a few words.

"Hurry back with me, Don; there's the mischief to pay with the boys!" exclaimed the newcomer, excitedly. "I knew where I'd be likely to find you, and I hurried to beat the band. No, it isn't a fight, and there hasn't been a raid on our stock by any of the rustlers that come up across the Mexican border. It's all about that Felix Miller, whose father is foreman for Colonel Derring; the boys caught him stealing, red-handed; and in your father's absence I'm afraid they're taking him out right now, to give him a coat of tar and feathers!"

CHAPTER IV.

SURPRISING FELIX.

Don seemed to be considerably taken aback by the strange news which had been brought by his chum.

"Come on, and let's make for the ranch quarters, boys; perhaps we can get there in time to put a stop to this thing!" he cried, wheeling his horse around again, and once more digging his heels into the animal's flanks.

So the three of them were quickly flying along over the plain, keeping as close together as the circumstances permitted. And as they thus rode, it was possible for them to talk back and forth in some measure.

"When did this happen, do you say, Adrian?" asked Don, whose forehead showed a line of wrinkles; for which there was good reason; because his father being away there was no telling where the wild spirits among the cowboys might lead them; and as Felix was the only son of Derring's foreman, if he were actually put to the shame of being tarred and feathered, or ridden on a rail, or whipped, in order to punish him for stealing, there could be no telling to what lengths the men of the Double

D. Ranch might go in reprisal; and the result would be that when Mr. Mackay returned home, he would find a war on his hands, something he had always managed to avoid by skillful diplomacy.

"Oh! just a short time ago," replied the newcomer. "Some of the boys were for holding him till you came back; but by far the greater part of them declared for taking Felix out to the trees, away from the ranch buildings, and making a bird of him. When I saw that there was something of a dispute, I thought that perhaps I might find you before it was too late; so I cut away without any one noticing me."

"Oh! I hope we get there in time!" said Don, earnestly, feeling that in his father's absence it devolved on him to take his part, and try to avoid an open rupture with a troublesome neighbor, who would be only too ready to take up the war issue if only given half a chance.

"So do I," echoed Billie, but with an entirely different meaning to his words; for the grandfather spirit was just then in control, and he had his "fighting face" in evidence; "because I'd like to see just how they do tar and feather a fellow. I've heard a heap about it, you know. And if anybody ever deserved it, that sneak of a Felix Miller does. I just detest the sight of that boy. And he's been over to see you, Don, a number of times lately. I reckon he's had his eye on something or other, and when he found we were away, he just took the same on the sly."

"Hold on, Billie; don't you judge a fellow before you know the evidence against him," said Don, a little petulantly, for him. "Now Adrian, what was it he took?" and he turned toward the newcomer as he put this last question.

"I'll tell you," answered Adrian, readily enough, and with a convincing air about him, "it was that little nickel-plated bugle you own, and play on every once in a while. We all know that somehow it's just caught the fancy of Felix, and that he's been trying to get you to give it, or sell it to him, for a long time. We reckon that he came over to-day on his cayuse, meaning to tackle you again; and when he found you gone, why, he just snatched it, hid the same under his jacket, and was starting for his pony when Si Ketcham just suspected something, and grabbed him. And sure enough, they found it on Felix. Then there was the biggest row you ever heard."

"What did Felix say?" asked Don, still perplexed, and hardly knowing how he was going to appease the wrath of the excited cowboys, who evidently had welcomed this chance to strike a blow at the Derring foreman, a man heartily detested by many in that section of the country.

"Oh! what would any boy say when caught red-handed getting away with property belonging to another? Why, of course he lied—said you'd given him the bugle, and that he was to come over for it. But nobody believed him, you may be sure, though he stuck to it, and began to look scared when he

heard them talking about that same tar and feathers. I left him whining about what his father'd do if they just dared hurt him; but that was only making our men more ugly, you see."

A sudden light had flashed across the face of Don. Adrian noticed it, and immediately started to wonder what it meant. He knew that the Mackay boy was capable of thinking up wonderful schemes on the spur of the moment; many times in the past he had seen this done. And so he was curious.

"What have you got in your head, now, Don?" he demanded.

"Never mind," replied the other, "but tell me some more about this thing. We're getting nearer the ranch buildings now, and if the boys haven't gone too far we c'n stop it yet. It must never happen, you know, Adrian. Such a thing would start trouble all along the line; and dad says we've got plenty as it is."

In answer to his hurried questions Adrian told what little there remained to relate, connected with the seizure of the boy from the Double D. Ranch, and the finding of Don's pet bugle under his jacket, just as he was about to throw himself on to his pony and ride away with his prize.

"He fought like a wildcat, too," remarked the latest comer, "and in the scuffle with Si I reckon he got a few scratches that made his face look bloody; but up to the time I came away nobody had laid a hand on him. But look, there's a puncher just leaving the buildings, and heading for the grove

where they said they'd take Felix. And Don, do you see what he's carrying over his shoulder?"

"Yes, it's a pillow from the house, that they just forgot to take along with them, and had to send back for, if they wanted any feathers," replied the other, with a grim look on his young face, as though he realized that he was now up against a tough proposition, and would need to have more than ordinary skill in order to manage it.

"And I can see smoke rising over the trees yonder!" called out Billie, who had been urging his tired pony along with all sorts of kicks and cuffs; for the poor beast had a burden to carry far in excess of that which either of the other bronchos had to assume. "Looks like they might be heating that tar up some, boys. Whew! this is getting serious for that little thief of a Felix, believe me!"

By cutting across, and avoiding passing anywhere near the ranch buildings, the corral, or the barns, they were able to follow close on the heels of the cowboy who was swinging the pillow that had been purloined from the house; so that they entered among the trees right on his heels. Indeed, he had apparently hardly been able to acquaint the assembled men of the fact that Don was coming, before the trio of boys galloped up, and threw themselves from their saddles.

There were fully a dozen cow-punchers present, all of them employees of the Keystone Ranch, and looking just like most of their class do, reckless chaps, one and all. And just now there was a grim

expression of determination on most of their faces, as though they had made up their minds to teach Felix a much needed lesson in honesty, come what might of it.

A fire was burning, over which stood a small black kettle, doubtless containing the tar which they meant to apply, as a foundation to hold the feathers that were to be generously sprinkled over Felix, once his clothes had been stripped off.

The boy himself was held in the grasp of two men. He had ceased to struggle, no doubt realizing the uselessness of it. The face he turned eagerly toward the newcomers was splotched with blood, and there were marks where the tears had run down his cheeks; for in his anger and fear Felix had actually cried, even while he raved of the terrible things his father would do to them, should they carry out their threat, and make a bird of him.

It was only the playful cowboy way of curing a thief of his evil ways; but any one who looked ahead could see what a long train of trouble such a course was almost sure to engender.

Don, followed closely by his two chums, jumped hurriedly from his horse, and immediately strode forward. The cowboys gathered around them, as though determined to stand together, and share what blame there was. Some of them might not have been exactly in favor of resorting to such harsh measures, in the beginning, but they had possibly been won over; so that Don faced what looked like a hostile array.

"What's all this mean, boys?" was what he said, first of all; "looks like you might be getting ready to entertain some one. I suppose you know that my father would never allow this, if he happened to be home?"

"We ketched the imp right in the act, Don!" remarked one, eagerly.

"Yes, he'd swiped your horn all right, and was making off with the same, when Si here, grabbed him!" declared another.

"I found it under his jacket, too," spoke up the leader of the group, Si himself; "and the little liar, he sez as how you *give* it to him, Don; actually declared he met you yesterday, and you told him to come over and get it any time! Course we knowed it was all made up, 'cause you think too much of that bugle to hand it over to such as him. And we jest made up our minds, Don, that we'd larn him a lesson he'd never forget."

"He did give it to me, I tells yuh!" gritted the boy, desperately, although he could not look Don in the face, Adrian noticed.

"How's that tar acomin' along, boys?" demanded Si, as though he meant to let nothing stand in the way of the carrying out of their plan, now that they had all preparations made.

"Wait!" said Don, sternly, "I've got something to say about this thing, Si. What's that you're carrying in your hand, Elmer? The bugle, eh? Well, give it to me. Now, here's where you boys came near making the greatest mistake of your

lives. Do you see this bugle; well, *it belongs to Felix,* not to me. When he came and took it he was only carrying off his own property. I gave it to him. Understand that, do you?" and stepping forward he thrust the nickel-plated instrument into the hands of the astonished prisoner, who came near dropping it as he stared hard at the donor.

Adrian drew a deep breath. He could begin to understand what his chum meant, and was amazed at his daring. And yet it was the only line of action that would have had any influence with those reckless cowboys, bent on having their fun, regardless of how Mr. Mackay afterwards paid the piper for their dancing.

"Here's your pony, Felix," continued Don, with sudden authority in his voice; "Jump in the saddle, and make a bee-line for home." Then as the amazed boy dropped the bugle that had tempted him so sorely, Don stooped and picked it up, thrusting it a second time into the other's hands, as he went on to say: "No, you must take it, for it belongs to you. I gave it to you, you remember. I wouldn't sell it, but I expect to get a new one, and that's why I agreed to turn over this old affair to you. I'm glad I got here in time to save you from an unpleasant experience, Felix. Good-bye! Come again sometime, won't you?"

Still staring at Don as though he thought the other had taken leave of his senses, Felix Miller gained his saddle, and galloped hastily away, look-

ing back once over his shoulder, but uttering no cry, no threat.

He seemed to be dazed, and hardly able to believe his eyes and his ears.

CHAPTER V.

JUST BEFORE THE ROUND-UP.

SEVERAL of the cowboys made a movement, as though half tempted to jump on to their ponies, and start in pursuit of Felix; but on second thought they abandoned the idea. Had the boy from the Double D. Ranch ventured to call back anything of a defiant nature, even Don's influence might not have kept those wild spirits from chasing headlong after him, ropes in hand. So that perhaps after all it was a fortunate thing all around that Felix did happen to be so dazed over what had come to pass, that for once he forgot to be aggressive, after his natural style.

"Sorry to interrupt your fun, boys," said Don, turning on the little bunch of his father's employees, with a smile on his face; "but you'll be glad I did, when you come to think it over. My father would have been very angry, you know; and there might have been no end of trouble. Besides, it's pretty hard to make a bird out of a poor fellow, when he just drops in to get his own property. Come on, Adrian, and you too, Billie; I've got something to show you at the ranch house. Boys, if I were you I

wouldn't say anything to dad about this; we'll keep mum about it, all right."

With that Don gained his saddle, and was off, followed by his two chums. And although they might have been greatly disappointed at the way things had turned out, nevertheless the cowboys broke into a ringing cheer, which Don answered by turning in his saddle, and waving his broad-rimmed hat vigorously to them; for there was hardly a man among them all but who would have risked his life, over and over again, for the son of their employer.

"Now, what's all this mean, Don?" began Adrian, when the three of them were well out of hearing of the others, and on their way back to the buildings that marked the center of the ranch proper.

"As to what?" remarked the other, chuckling at the same time; for he knew that he had mystified his comrades greatly.

"This business about that bugle of yours," continued Adrian.

"Yes," spoke up Billie, "haven't we heard you say a dozen times that you wouldn't sell it to that Felix Miller at any price; and yet here you go and tell the boys you *gave* it to him. Own up now, Don, you were just yarning, to get him off, so that there wouldn't be any trouble between Derring's crowd and ours."

At that Don turned upon Billie as he went on to say:

"I suppose it's only natural for you both to think that way; but let me tell you right now, you are wrong. I did give that bugle to Felix, just as I said."

"Well, then, he never knew that you had," continued Adrian, stoutly; "for if I ever saw a look of blank surprise on anybody's face, it was written all over his when he heard you say that. Why, his lower jaw just dropped, and he stared at you as if he thought he was dreaming."

At that Don laughed out.

"I reckon now he did think that way, Adrian," he observed, "but here's how it came about. I don't mind telling my chums, though I wouldn't want the boys to know how I'd played a little snap game on them, just to save us all from heaps of trouble."

"Well, please go on, Don," urged Billie, as the other paused for a few seconds. "You know you've got both of us worked up to fever pitch by this time, and I don't believe I can stand it much longer. How did it happen, then?"

"He did meet me, just the day before yesterday, when I was over looking at that prize bunch of cattle we've got up Simmons Run way; and asked me, like he has so many times before, if I hadn't made up my mind to sell him that bugle. Two of the boys were along with me, and they must have heard me tell him pretty sharp-like that it wasn't for sale. Well, would you believe it, when I got home, there was a letter from an aunt of mine back in Pennsyl-

vania. She said in it that, having heard from dad how fond I was of practicing on the bugle, she had bought a fine silver-mounted one in Philadelphia, and was sending it on to me for a birthday present."

"Well, I declare that *was* nice!" ejaculated Billie, grinning broadly.

"And boys, somehow, when I read that letter, my thoughts went out to Felix," continued Don, seriously; "and I began to feel sorry for him. He's just crazy to take up the bugle, but his father never gives him any money, to speak of, and he's too weakly to ride the range yet, you know, and earn much. And then and there I made up my mind that while I wouldn't sell my old bugle, I would give it to Felix. So, you see, after that it was really his property; and by stretching the truth a little he was actually taking what belonged to him, when he started to carry it off to-day!"

Both the others gave a shout at this.

"Well, if you don't take the cake, Don, when it comes to hatching up things in a pinch!" cried Billie.

"And about the cleverest game I ever heard of, too!" echoed Adrian, leaning over to give Don a playful slap on the back as they galloped on.

"But tell me, Adrian, would anything short of that stopped the boys from carrying out their wretched work, and in that way starting trouble all along the line? You ought to know, because you saw how mad they were?" Don went on to ask.

"I reckon, now, you're about right," replied the other, soberly. "They were just worked up into the worst fit of rage I ever saw them in," answered Adrian. "You see, of late those punchers working on the Double D. Ranch have been pestering our boys a heap; and this bold act of Miller's kid was the last straw on the camel's back. They vowed they'd show that bunch that it'd got to end; and only for you coming up, and springing that smart trick on them, I reckon they'd have done the same, Don."

"As for me," remarked Billie, "I don't know whether I'm sorry, or glad. Because, you see, I did want so much to find out just how they put the feathers on. And now, goodness knows how long it'll be before I get another chance."

"Poor Billie!" mocked Don; "perhaps the boys will oblige you with an exhibition some day, if you offer to let them practice on you. But remember, we promised not to say a single word to dad about it all. I feel sure he'd discharge some of our boys, and I'd hate to see Si, or any of the others, for that matter, go, because they're a fine lot, all around."

"But what d'ye think Felix will do about it?" demanded Billie.

"Nothing, most likely," Adrian put in; "when he comes to realize that he's got Don's bugle at last, and for nothing at that, he'll just think he's in luck, and that'll be the end of it, believe me."

"Yes, and never even saying 'thank you,' at that," pursued Billie, in disgust.

"Wait and see!" was all Don said, and with that, as if by mutual consent the subject of Felix Miller was dropped.

When they reached the ranch buildings it was to find that the mail had arrived, one of the boys going across country every day to bring the bag back with him, and execute any errands there might be on the slate at the time.

"Here's a short letter from father," called out Don," and he says that he may be detained longer than he had expected, and that we are not to hold back the little drive and round-up that was planned for to-morrow, on that account. The foreman, Si Ketcham, can take charge, he goes on to say. If he gets back in time he'll run over and join us; but we all know what he wants done, so there's no need of holding back, when all preparations have been made."

"Bully!" shouted Billie, throwing up his hat wildly; "I've been looking forward so long to having that little experience, that I'd been just sick if it was put off right now. Your dad's a sensible man, even if he is my Uncle Gordon."

"That's the queerest part of it," added Adrian; at which Billie stopped his jumping up and down, to look confused, as though he realized that he had, as so often happened, made a mess of what he meant to say.

"How's the weather going to be for to-morrow, Don?" asked Billie, trying to turn the subject.

"So far as I can see it looks promising," was the reply; "but then, at this time of the year we never know what to expect. You see we're on the edge of the desert nearly, and rains come mighty seldom to this section. Our grass grows in the little valleys and coulies among the foothills; or else around some spring hole. So the chances are ten to one we'll have hot, dry weather."

"Well, I reckon you've hit it right close to the bull's-eye, Don," Billie went on to say; "because I don't believed it's rained twice since I've been here, and that's going on three months now. Still, the nights get chilly, and a fellow don't dare to go anywhere far without his coat along. But there's Ah Chin Chin the Chinese cook, starting out to blow the horn for dinner. That suits me first-rate, because my ride has given me an appetite. But I say, Don, you forgot something in all that excitement."

"Yes, the wolfskin," replied the other; "but I'm going to hang it up in the mess hall, and watch to see what the boys say. Come along, fellows. First of all, you take a look at it, Adrian, and tell me what you think."

As soon as the freshly secured wolf hide was displayed before the other he uttered an ejaculation.

"Why, as sure as anything, I do believe you've gone and knocked over that Old Calamity; however did you do it, boys?" he demanded, examining the hide at closer range.

The little story of the ride was soon told; and the skin hung up in the dining hall, where it would meet the eyes of the cowboys as they came tumbling in. And as Don had anticipated, there was immediately a shout raised, as every one pushed forward to examine the prize. Not a single doubter could be found; and it was the opinion of all that the terror of the range cattle had been laid low; for this was undoubtedly the skin of Old Calamity; they knew it by the many marks that spoke so eloquently of battles in the past, in which the big wolf had engaged.

No one ventured to refer to the recent little unpleasantness. Doubtless among themselves the cow-punchers had discussed it over and over, nor could they understand how Don could have given that bugle to the Miller kid, and the latter look so amazed when he heard it; but then, it was an ugly piece of business; and now that all had passed off, they had better forget it.

So when they heard what Don read from his father's short letter, all sorts of plans were discussed for the work that was to begin on the next day; when the entire range would be scoured in order to bring in, and count the cattle, as well as brand any young heifers and maverick strays; and corral those intended for immediate shipment.

Billie was brimming over with anticipation as night settled down, and declared he could hardly wait for another day to come around, so anxious was he to see how the round-up was conducted, and

to share in its work. But even Billie, sanguine as he was, did not dream of one half of the excitement that was due to arrive with the fall round-up.

CHAPTER VI.

BILLIE LEARNING THE ROPES.

"THERE! how did I manage that steer, Don?" demanded Billie, late on the following afternoon, as he drew his dripping broncho up in front of where his two chums sat upon their mounts.

They had been busy from sun-up, for the round-up party had started off with the beginning of day, to begin operations miles away from home. Already had two separate herds been driven in to where they had camped, and under the supervision of the old and experienced foreman, Si Ketcham, they were counted, those that were wanted for shipment selected, and placed in a strong corral; others branded; and finally the lot driven forth again, for another siege, during the winter, on the range, as free as the air apparently, though watched from time to time by cowboys, mounted on their swift ponies.

Both Don and Adrian had been through all this so often that it lacked some of the charm of freshness that appealed to the excited Billie. The latter had helped around wherever he could find any one willing to let him take a hand. He was by nature so clumsy that the boys did not often allow him to

try anything that called for dexterity and shrewdness; but as Billie had made friends everywhere since his coming to the ranch, nobody ever got provoked when he did blunder, but greeted his mistakes with roars of laughter.

Finally he had decided that he must try and rope a steer. And they had picked about the easiest mark possible for him, so that he might have a half-way chance of succeeding.

And both the other boys had had the time of their lives watching how Billie went about his task, which he had managed to accomplish after a crude fashion.

He never knew why his chums' eyes seemed to be red when he joined them; they said something about the sand blowing more than usual, as they wiped the tears away; and Billie, simple soul, believed them, so that he actually put that question up to Don.

"You got him finally, Billie," was the truthful reply of Don; "Of course it's a hard job at first; because you have to learn the ropes before you know just how to meet every sudden move he makes. One time I was afraid the steer would get you; but after all, you managed to wind him up in your rope, and he fell over. And that's the principal thing, to drop the beast. And now they're calling to you to come and finish matters by pressing the brand on his flank. Go on, Billie; you're getting there fast, let me tell you."

"Thanks, Don; you make me proud, I tell you;"

and with that he hurried away, panting still with his recent exertions, to carry out the further direction of the branding gang, and clap the hot iron on the flank of the kicking steer.

And so the good work went on until the shades of evening began to close around the temporary camp on the open plain, where Ah Chin Chin, the Chinese cook, was busily engaged at the chuck wagon, getting supper ready.

It was a great event for the novice, Billie, when the fire blazed up, the appetizing odor of the cooking meal began to fill the surrounding asmosphere, and the cowboys, clad in their picturesque garments, with jingling spurs, and the swagger that comes of much hard riding day after day, loitered around, engaged in good-natured chaffing, story telling, and later on rubbing down the tired ponies that had been pressed to their best during the ten hours just passed.

And after supper was over, they sat around the roaring fire, where many a strange yarn was spun, to all of which Billie listened eagerly; for he was drinking in the life of the cattle ranch in big gulps these days.

The three boys had a tent along, all their own. Most of the punchers scorned such a thing as a cover, preferring just to throw themselves down on the ground, with the blue sky for a blanket, "pinned with a star." Long custom had hardened them to such things; for night after night had they not kept watch over the saddle band of horses when

out watching cattle, and there was danger of a stampede from any cause; or else the peril of a swift descent on the part of rustlers who came up from the border, with the intention of stealing valuable herds, to be driven across the line to safety?

Near by the riding horses were corraled for the night with ropes, where there happened to be green grass growing; from time to time there would come on the soft night wind the lowing of some steer, stirred up over the events of the day; or it might be the annoying bark of prowling coyotes, scenting the refuse from the chuck wagon. Anon, out among the sage brush and cactus, a prairie dog would give tongue in his saucy way, as there seemed to be a village of the little animals close by the camp.

There was a drowsy chirp of crickets in the long grass near the spring hole, with occasionally the shrill voice of a katydid chiming in; all of which seemed to be a part and parcel of that glorious night under the stars, one Billie would never forget, as long as he lived, for one of his dreams was being realized.

On the coming day they expected to move along, and make camp still further away from home, this time closer to the broken country where the best ranges lay between the rocky uplifts.

There was a watch kept all night long, while the camp seemed to be resting in peace and silence. Not that any particular danger was expected to come upon them; but the old foreman was a cau-

tious plainsman, who believed in being prepared for a storm, even when the sky seemed blue and serene; for when it came it gave little warning.

And Billie was so wearied after all he had gone through with on the preceding day that he just slept like a log. The first thing he heard was the reveille of the range, the spoon of the cook beating against a fryingpan, and making a racket calculated to arouse the hardest sleeper. So another day began, which, although none of the boys suspected it just then, was fated to be marked with a succession of adventures for the round-up party, and Don and his two chums in particular.

They made their move as soon after breakfast as possible. The round-up bands went galloping away over the plain, after having made arrangements to meet the rest of the outfit at a certain place, well known to most of them. And when this new camping ground was reached at about eleven some of them were already coming in, driving bunches of cattle, shouting, and making things go at a lively rate.

Then the scenes of the previous day were enacted on even a greater scale; for it happened that there were more mavericks in this section, as well as a greater number of calves to brand, now that they were at it.

The midday meal at such a time does not amount to a great deal, since the cow-punchers are entirely too scattered, and too busy to pay much attention to eating.

All of the boys had been in the thick of things, doing their best to assist. By themselves they had brought in quite a lively bunch of cattle, cows, steers and youngsters; and afterwards helped do the sorting, as well as branding, where it was necessary.

"All the time I've been here, Don," remarked Billie, as they sat in their saddles resting, after their task had been accomplished, and a bite of lunch was being made ready by the cook, to be eaten by the men as they happened to come in by squads, "you've never kept your word to take me away over there among the hills, and show me what lies there."

"Well, that's a fact, Billie," was the other's reply, "but the fact is I haven't been around in that section a great deal myself. You see, there's a bit of a nasty stretch of sandy desert that lies between, which isn't nice to cross. Then, besides, nobody knows what lies in those hills—wild beasts, and reptiles, the Gila monster some of the boys say, which is a horribly poisonous thing, you understand, and feared worse than rattlesnakes by cowpunchers; yes, and they say rustlers make a hideout of the rocky places over there, hard cases like that Mardo Mendosa, the Mexican, dad discharged a month or more ago when he learned that he had once been a cattle thief, and was said never to have changed his spots."

"Yes, I remember him well," said Billie. "I never liked the man from the time I first met him. He had the blackest eyes, and they seemed to be

shifting all the time, as if he just couldn't look you in the face. But see here, Don, do they really believe he's gone back to rustling cattle again; and that he'll try to grab some of your stock, to pay Uncle Gordon back for sending him adrift that time?"

"That's what they say, Billie; but of course I don't know how true it is. All the same, I'm going to get over yonder with you and Adrian the first chance that comes along, now. We can do a little hunting, you know. Perhaps you'd not mind knocking over a sleek panther; or it's barely possible we might scare up a grizzly, for they sometimes get this far down, though not often. Away up in the mountains you're more apt to find them, eh, Adrian? I reckon, now, you've seen more than a few roped by cowboys, and then shot."

"Just what I have, Don," answered the other, who had a ranch of his own away up in Wyoming, which was being run for him by his uncle, while he preferred staying with his chum down on the border of New Mexico and Arizona.

"Are we going to be at this thing much longer?" asked Billie, waving his hand around, to cover the bustling workers, the cook's outfit, and the tents that had been once more erected.

"Listen to him, would you, Adrian," exclaimed Don, laughingly; "he's tired of all the hard work already; and only two days back it was Billie who said he could hardly sleep he was that anxious to get in a round-up bunch."

"That ain't it," declared the fat boy, aggres-

sively; "I'm willing to keep right along at this for days; only I wanted to know, so we could plan a trip into the foothills over yonder, and start some fun going. I've hardly used my new rifle any since I've been here; and just as you say, I'd like to knock over some big game before a great while. That's all, Don; and don't go to saying that I'm a quitter, because I ain't. But what d'ye suppose that cowboy is waving his hat for, while he's galloping like mad in the direction of the camp here? He's yelling something too, only I don't seem to make head or tail of it. Anybody hurt, and do they want you to come and play doctor, Don?"

"Keep still just a little while, Billie, and perhaps we can make out what he's saying, because I'm accustomed to the way these boys talk," said Don, earnestly.

The rider, who was fast nearing the camp, kept on waving, and letting out his voice in whoops, between times calling something to the others, who were now standing around listening eagerly.

"Do you get it now, Don; then please tell me?" pleaded Billie, to whom much of the usual cowboy lingo was an unsolved riddle.

"Yes, I can understand what he says," replied the other, who seemed to be growing more and more excited as he spoke. "He wants us to know that Si sent him in to tell the rest of us to hurry back to where he is; for our best bunch of cattle has disappeared, and there are signs to show that rustlers have driven them off in the night.

CHAPTER VII.

THE STOLEN CATTLE.

"WHOOP! what d'ye think of that, now?" shouted Billie, now visibly worked up over the exciting news. "Cattle thieves at work, and we're going to round up a different kind of game. Count me in, Don! Don't you dare to think of letting me stay back. If you just look at me right now, you'll see that my grandfather blood is working, and I've got my fighting face in evidence. Wow! Why don't you holler too, Adrian?"

But Adrian, while he might also feel the blood leaping through his veins just as Billie did, could better restrain his feelings. He held up a hand, as if to beg the excited boy to calm himself, and all would be well.

The greatest excitement had ensued in the temporary camp. Cowboys were running this way and that, seeking their ponies, which had been either "hobbled," or tied to a rail during the noon recess. And as was customary with their class at such a time, they made considerable of a row while getting ready.

Quickly they began to gather around the messenger who had come from the foreman. Don, in

the absence of his father, and Si, took charge. Looking around, he counted six of the punchers present, which with himself and chums would make nine.

"Plenty here to do the business," he announced, "with Si himself. When any of the rest come in, tell them, Chin Chin, to stay by the camp, and look out for the stock. Are you ready, boys?"

A lusty chorus of affirmations greeted his question.

"Then we're off. Lead the way, Collins, and make it as short as you can. Likely as not we'll have some hard riding before us this afternoon. Yes, stick what the cook gives you in your pockets; perhaps you'll want a bite before long. And now, here we go! Whoop! come on, everybody!"

They galloped away in a cloud of dust, heading straight back over the trail the messenger had made, every husky fellow apparently just wild with delight over the prospect of a speedy encounter with the enemies most detested by range riders the whole West over—the sneaking rustlers who did their work in the night, and vanished with their stolen herds.

It was about all Billie could do to keep up with these hard riders; but as has been said before, he had a very stubborn streak in his nature; and besides, could stick to any ordinary horse pretty well. It was only that master of trickery, the unbroken broncho, Jupiter, who could dislodge him every time.

Besides, Billie was that eager to keep along with the rest, so as to be a factor in the melee, when the end came, that he would whip poor Maudie as he had never done before, in order to make her run with her companions in the race.

After an hour's mad gallop they reached a place where a single man sat his pony, apparently waiting for their coming. This was of course the foreman, Si Ketcham, and he must have counted them as they came along in that cloud of alkali dust, for the first thing he said was:

"Eleven ought to be enough to turn down that bunch of cattle thieves, and plant 'em for keeps whar they won't try their mean games ever again."

"Then you're dead sure the cattle ain't just strayed away, air ye, Si?" asked one of the newcomers, a little sawed-off fellow who went by the name of Bunch.

"They were here the day before yesterday, we know that," the foreman went on to explain, for he believed that it would be policy for him to take them all into his confidence in the start; "and they disappeared either last night or the one before, which I take it means they're gone these thirty-six or forty hours. Here where the trail leads off; and you c'n see the marks of four hosses alongside the cattle. How about it, boys?"

When they had all taken a good look there was not a dissenting voice, for they one and all agreed with the foreman.

"Then the sooner we git started the better!"

called out Bunch, who, small in stature as he was, had always been a clever hand at his work, and when it came to taking chances he could hold his own with the best of them.

"I only wanted to let yer hosses blow a bit, before we took up the trail," said the foreman. "The only thing I'm sorry about is that Mr. Mackay ain't along with us, and carryin' his repeating rifle; because I've got a hunch we'll feel the need of such a far shootin' weapon before we come back. Here ye are, boys; we're off!"

Once more the gallop was resumed, and for an hour the party went at top speed over the level stretch, always heading toward the rougher country that Billie has been gazing so eagerly at only a short time before.

Once he mentioned this fact, when he happened to be close enough alongside Don to make his voice carry above the dull plodding of many hoofs.

"Just to think, Don, how quick my wish is coming out? Why, here we are heading straight for the bad lands that I was sighin' to see, and before a single night's gone by. I feel something like Si says he did; only I wish it was my Marlin six-shooter that was along, instead of that big gun of Uncle Gordon's. What if these here lawless rustlers put up a fight for the prize bunch of cattle?"

"They'd better not, if they know what's good for them," replied the other, with a shake of his head. "Every cowboy always carries a gun at his hip, and knows how to use it mighty slick, too. So

I reckon we can get on without that rifle, this trip, Billie. Keep the long barrel till we come out here on a hunt, and now, if you want to have your throat blistered with this dust just talk away; but don't expect me to answer all your questions."

Of course Billie took the hint.

Another hour passed, and they were crossing the stretch of sandy waste that lay between the plain and the rocky uplifts; like a warning barrier, to keep the cattle from straying from their pastures into the more dangerous territory.

Here it was harder work than ever, and many times did the boys have to moisten their throats from the contents of their water canteens, because of the intense heat, and the floating fine sand that seemed to almost choke them.

But they kept getting nearer and nearer to the rough country, and many curious glances were cast ahead, while the hard riders speculated as to what sort of reception they might expect from those who must surely have discovered their coming ere now.

It was along about two hours before sundown when they reached the other side of the desert strip, and entered among trees once more, for they grew at the base of the hills.

"Look here, and you'll see where the trail has been wiped partly out," the foreman went on to say, as he brought the squad to a sudden halt, "the hounds thought they could hoodwink the lot of us, and start us on a wrong track; but it ain't agoin' to work, not worth a cent."

He led the way along, now and then jumping from his pony the better to pick up the blind trail. Billie watched every move eagerly, for this was something new to him, and accordingly interested him greatly.

"Keep a lookout above, boys," called back Si, at one time, as they chanced to pass a place where there was plenty of cover for unseen marksmen to crouch in concealment, and open fire upon their flank.

After that the squad separated, some of the riders keeping along close to the foreman, while others drew nearer the rise, all watching for the first sign of trouble to show itself, when a signal would give warning.

"Jest like I thought," Billie heard the foreman say, after he had taken a good look ahead. "They driv the steers into the hidden valley, and ain't had no time to get 'em out again yet. We been too quick for 'em, that's what. See, it heads right straight for the hole in the wall, boys! Keep quiet, now, and p'raps we'll give the snakes the surprise of their lives."

Apparently cowboys knew when it was a time for repressing their feelings, as well as when to give full vent to their yells; for not a sound could be heard now, save the dull thud of ponies' hoofs on the earth; or it might be a sharp click as the bare rock was encountered.

So they kept on for some little time, gradually approaching the place pointed out by the keen-eyed

foreman, when he spoke of the valley that lay hidden behind the first range of rocky hills and out spurs.

The formation of the land was such that it formed a deep pocket, or valley, which was very difficult of access. Cowboys, searching for straying cattle, had found a narrow passageway between two rocky buttresses. There was but scant pasturage in this queer valley, else they might have taken advantage of it before.

And now the indications pointed to the fact that the cattle rustlers had driven their stolen herd through this gap, and that the prize steers might still be found beyond the rocky walls.

It was with all their senses on the alert that the Keystone boys pushed through the opening, and entered the depression between the two ranges, a cup in the hill, so to speak.

"There they are!" exclaimed one of those in the advance, as cattle were discovered feeding at the upper end of the valley.

"And our lost bunch at that; I kin tell 'em from here!" cried a second.

"Keep right on!" called out the foreman; "and if you sight a rustler, no need of my telling ye what to do, boys!"

Still mounted on their ponies they began to pick their way along. The valley was not of any great size; but the singular thing about it lay in the fact that Nature had so surrounded it by high white cliffs that outside of that small gap there did not seem to be any sort of entrance or exit visible.

"I don't see any sign of the thieves around," Billie remarked, as he kept alongside his two chums, and allowed his broncho to do the hard work of picking a safe way over the many obstacles.

"As like as not they must have heard us coming, and got out in time," was what Adrian observed; for as yet there had not been a cry from a single cowboy to indicate that they had seen the first sign of the enemy.

Billie was going to say something more, for he liked to be talking whenever he could; but just then there came a tremendous crash, that made the very rocks under them tremble, and the ponies manifested evidences of great fright, dancing up and down, and being next to uncontrollable, in fact.

"Thunder!" ejaculated Billie, that being his first thought; but the ears of his comrades, more accustomed to the sounds of mining operations, had recognized something suspicious in the rattle that quickly succeeded the first dreadful outburst.

"An explosion, and from our rear!" cried Don. "Oh! I know what it must mean; they have blown up the pass by which we entered, and perhaps by now there's no way of getting the cattle out of this place; or even escaping ourselves, unless we grow wings, and fly up the face of these high cliffs!"

A silence fell upon the little group of riders as they looked back over the trail by which they had come.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN, AND OUT OF THE POT.

"SEE the smoke wreathes rising over there, right where we came in!" exclaimed Adrian, as he pointed with a finger that may have trembled a little, because of the attendant excitement.

Si Ketcham took charge with his customary business ability.

"Here, some of you boys go on ahead, and round up them steers. Bring 'em down the old valley right away. Alkali Bob, you take Skinny, Bunch and Magpie to do that part of the game. The rest of you come with me, and we'll see what's happened back yonder."

The three Broncho Rider Boys determined to accompany those who were returning toward the exit. They chose this because it seemed more than likely there might be some lively times coming to pass there; whereas the others would only have the hard job of gathering the scattered cattle, and after "milling" them, get them started for the exit.

Before they had reached the wall they realized that their suspicions had been well founded. A great quantity of rock had been blown up by

dynamite or some other powerful explosive agency. It lay around in great masses, and seemed to have utterly destroyed the narrow opening, through which they had gained access to the secluded valley.

"What do you think, Don, was it meant for us, and did they expect it to go off just when we were passing through here?" asked Billie, somewhat in a tone of awe, as the three of them sat in their saddles, and surveyed the scene of destruction.

"I give it up," came the ready reply. "Perhaps those rustlers are reckless enough for anything, and would just as soon rub the lot of us out, as they would eat. Then again, perhaps they meant it just as has come about, and that not a steer, not a horse should ever come back again, after once getting inside this queer hole in the wall. It makes a fellow shiver to think of the narrow escape all of us had."

"But here we are, caged like wild partridges!" declared Billie. "What if we never can get out of this, now? Lucky, then, that we've got the fat steers to fall back on, when we get awful hungry."

"Oh! I don't think it's going to get down as bad as that," remarked Adrian.

"There's our foreman climbing up the heap of rock right now; and where he goes I rather think we can lead our bronchos," said Don. "They're as sure-footed as goats, and can climb nearly as well. Look at him waving his hat now! I expect he's found a way out. Those sly rustlers must have fired their blast, and left us just a wedge, through which we can squeeze."

"That's all very fine, Don," interrupted Billie; "but what about the steers? Will you leave them in here to die of hunger?"

"Well, I should say not," returned the other, emphatically; "it may be possible to clear enough of the rubble away, to let them pass out, one at a time. They're used to rough sledding, and can climb right good, too. But we'll leave all that to Si, who knows what to do."

The foreman justified the confidence that Don placed in him, for he had his plan of campaign arranged almost immediately. Gathering his men about him, he set them to work vigorously at the heap of rock.

It was found possible to move a section here and there, and under the guidance of Si this was done with all speed possible. For they could hear the shouts of their companions growing closer, and knew that the cattle would soon have arrived, when it was to be hoped that there might be some sort of passage through which they could pass singly.

"There's a man on a horse away on the top of that cliff!" suddenly exclaimed Billie, pointing as he spoke.

"Two, three, four of them!" cried Don, shrilly, wishing to call the attention of the foreman to the fact.

"Thar's our rustlers, boys," remarked Si, without waiting to take a second look; "and jest as I reckoned, it's that Mexican, Mendosa. They must a seen us acomin', an' got out of the pot before we

kim up. That trap at the mouth was set for us, but she held fire too long."

He shook his hand menacingly at the four figures that were outlined against the soft evening sky toward the South. They replied in kind, and their shouts of defiance came faintly to the ears of the prisoners of the valley. Then the quartette wheeled their ponies, and disappeared from view, as though fairly satisfied with what they had done to wipe out the stain of their leader's summary dismissal from the pay roll at Keystone Ranch.

The men under Si went at their work with more vim than ever. It galled them to know that they owed all this trouble to that vindictive Mexican, and his followers.

"Anyhow, the feller that laughs last always laughs longest," remarked Bunch, who had come up with the rest, for the cattle were now near at hand, and he had been sent on to inform Si Ketcham.

"And best, don't ye forgit that, Bunch," added another cow puncher.

"And we're just agoin' to git them steers out of this trap, or else my name is Dennis, which I don't believe it is," argued the foreman, encouragingly.

After a while a pony was led up over the rocks, following the trail marked out by the rock workers; and when he reached the other side, a shout attested to the appreciation of the others.

Then the cattle were gradually shifted around until the leading steer could be made to climb the rocks. Once he got started he did splendidly; and

as he passed through the broken opening a shout of joy broke out from every witness; for then they knew that in spite of all the obstacles that had been thrown in their path, they had won out.

Of course, after that it was easier, for the rest of the cattle were ready to follow after their leader. One by one they passed by the ascent, and through the narrow exit that actually rubbed both their sides at the same time, as they pressed on, urged by the cowboy yells behind, which they knew full well.

When the last steer had gone out the boys started to follow, each one leading his pony. No serious accidents followed, and in due time they were all gathered on the outside, discussing the remarkable things that had happened.

But Si Ketcham could not be induced to take two bites to his cherry. Hardly had the ponies been given a breathing spell than he had the boys on their backs once more, and gathering the herd together for a night march, across the hot sand of the desert strip, heading for the camp where they had left the balance of the outfit to guard the other herds.

That was a time that Billie would not soon forget. His chums advised him to drop out, and said they would stand by him until morning, when they would all be wonderfully refreshed, so that they might continue their journey with new life. But that was where the old obstinacy showed again. Billie considered that he ought to be able to last as long as either of his comrades, forgetting that they had lives of experience to fall back on, when their

muscles were getting as hard as flint, while his were still more or less flabby.

Fortunately the foreman was a merciful man to those beasts that happened to be placed under his charge. Some of the men declared that he was making all this slow pace just to kill time; but others knew that if they kept it up all night the dawn would find them very close to the round-up camp.

Once on the sandy stretch the cattle did not loiter. They seemed to understand that this was a dangerous locality to be lost in, for they huddled near together as they moved along.

And so, when the gray of morning came, they had left the horrible desert waste behind, and were once again on the plain, with turf under their feet.

All through the long vigils of the night, when every little while they would move along for another mile or so, their only guides were those that hung in the vast blue vault overhead, the moon that sank so early, and the multitude of stars that tried to light their way as best they were able.

It was good to see the plain again, after that spell in the uplifts, where the stunted, grotesque cedars clung to the sides of the rocky heights; or pinions found a scanty footing among the clefts here and there. How pleasant to see the purple sage brush growing, breast high in places, fragrant in the early morning air, gray where waving in the eddies of wind, darker elsewhere, and even covering the low hills far away on the horizon.

In this manner, then, did they return to their camp, where those who had remained behind came forth to greet them with true cowboy yells and antics.

Why, it was like a dream to Billie, and he was that tired that hardly had he partaken of a light breakfast, and crawled into the tent, than he was sound asleep; and from that time until the next morning they saw nothing of him.

It was different with his more hardened chums, for while they too took a nap of a few hours, to make up for the sleep they had lost while driving herd; when noon came they were on hand again for more feed; and later they took part in some of the work that still remained to be done before the round-up could be called complete.

In all it had been wonderfully successful. They had carried out the wishes of the cattleman to the letter; and Don had reason to feel satisfied, for he knew his father would be more than pleased with the results attained. And then, that recovery of the stolen herd was a feat to be proud of; not a single steer that they knew of was missing; while the baffled rustler band had been compelled to flee from the neighborhood, knowing full well that every ranchman's hand would be soon raised against them, once the story went around.

And Si Ketcham saw to it that a messenger on a fleet pony was dispatched to carry the news to the next ranch, where it would be sent on still further by a chain of riders, until the whole country was

aroused. Then woe to the rustler who might be sighted, and who could not give good reasons for being in the neighborhood.

Three more days did they spend out with the round-up bunch, and that saw them through. Still Mr. Mackay failed to come; and when the boys arrived home, Don found another letter awaiting him, in which his father told of some unexpected but very important business that was keeping him in Los Angeles; but that he would be home just as soon as he could. Meanwhile he expected that things would be moving along in a steady rut, for he placed the utmost confidence in Si Ketcham.

Don took pains to read that part of the letter out to the foreman, and was satisfied from the look on the strong face of the old cowman that he was going to justify the confidence his employer placed in him.

Meanwhile other stirring events were on the docket, and about due, for the Broncho Rider Boys.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SPY.

"How about our chances for getting away to-morrow, Don?" asked Adrian, some days after the round-up; as he and Billie, lounging in a comfortable shady nook not a dozen yards away from the empty bunk house, were joined by the Mackay chum.

"Well, it looks good to me, just now," replied Don, nodding his head cheerfully, as he threw himself down on the bench beside them.

"How is your father feeling, after getting back home?" went on Adrian.

"Pretty fair; and he was mighty well pleased with what we did about getting that prize bunch of stock back, after they had been driven off by Mardo Mendosa and his gang. He wants me to give Billie the time of his life while he's here with us; and not a single word did he say against our taking a little side trip into the hills, looking for game."

"He knows that you are always careful, Don, and not apt to be reckless," Billie broke in with just then.

"I try to be," Don observed, modestly; "though sometimes the temptation to rush things is pretty

strong. A boy has a heap to learn before he can expect to be as steady as a man."

"Who was that dark-faced chap I saw talking with your father, Don?" asked Adrian.

"Don made a queer gesture with his hands, at the same time hunching up his shoulders, as if in disapproval.

"His name is Coots, and he belongs over at the Double D. place. Colonel Derring sent him over with some sort of message to dad. It didn't seem to be pleasant news, either, for I saw my father frown when he read it."

"I didn't know that your father had any sort of business with Derring," Adrian remarked, looking surprised.

"He has about as little as he can help, in connection with cattle," came the reply. "There is nearly always some sort of bad blood between the people of our ranch and the Derrings; the boys accuse each other of all kinds of things, such as roping steers, and even changing brands, which is a serious thing, you know, Adrian. But so far we've managed without any open break, though Colonel Derring is a hard neighbor to get on with. But it seems there's something more than this cattle business between them."

"You must mean that Arizona mine matter you were speaking about one day?" suggested Billie, eagerly; for he liked to hear all these stirring things, since they made his blood leap through his veins in the most delightful way.

"That's it, the mine," answered Don, looking serious himself now.

"What about it?" Adrian went on to ask.

"Just now I don't know what the real trouble is," explained Don; "except that dad has a certain share in this Red Spar copper mine, and some sort of strong syndicate is trying to freeze him out."

"Oh! I understand now!" cried Billie; "you see, I've heard my father talk all about such things. If he is a parson, he ought to have been a lawyer, for he's up in all things connected with the courts. And I reckon, now, Don, this here old Derring, he's in with that same greedy, grabbing syndicate that wants to own the whole business?"

"Just what he is, Billie," smiled the other, for he and Adrian were always glad when the stout chum manifested unusual smartness.

"Then your father ought to fix up some plan to beat the rascals at their own game, that's what I say," continued the other, gravely. "And if he put it in your hands, chances are ten to one you could find a way."

"Perhaps he may some of these fine days," Don went on, gayly; "and if that ever happens, you can set it down as dead sure that the very first thing I'll do will be to call on my two bully Broncho Rider Boy chums to help out."

"Why, we'd jump out of our skins at the offer, Don!" declared Billie; "just you try us, that's all, eh, Adrian?"

"Count me in any game there is;" the one spoken

to returned; " and when I throw my hat in the ring I generally go with my whole heart. I never could do things half way, like some boys I know. But Don, days have gone by now, and you haven't heard anything from Rolfe Perkins, have you? "

" Oh! you haven't forgotten what that Indian brave, Spotted Horse told us," the other observed. " But after all, perhaps it was just talk, and there's nothing in it. He wanted to do something in return for the rabbits we gave him; and hatched up that story, or made it look some stronger. All the same, whenever I happen to run across Rolfe Perkins I expect to keep an eye on him, and my hand free to reach my gun. He's a hard case, they all say; and I'd rather see him going than coming."

" How about that imp Felix? " continued Adrian.

" Never heard anything more from him to this day, and that's a fact," replied Don.

" Then you're out a bugle," laughed Billie.

" That may be so, but my new one has arrived, and is such a beauty that I never miss the other. Besides, how can we tell but what some fine day the bread we cast out on the waters may come home again? I've heard dad say that more'n once, when he was doing something for a thankless Indian, or a Mexican cowboy that had been in a spill, with a broken arm to have set. I'm satisfied to forget all about that little business, and let it go at that."

" Well, all I can say is that you've got the biggest heart of any fellow I ever ran across in all my days," ventured Adrian.

"That's where you're away off," declared Don, "for here's a bigger one. Billie would give away his only suit, and run around in his pajamas, if he thought the other fellow needed the clothes more than he did."

"Like fun I would!" burst out the one indicated. "I hope I'm not that silly, and in this broiling sun too. But tell me, Don, was there anything for me in that last package that came up from town? Your father was going to buy me some cartridges, you remember, for my Marlin. I only fetched three boxes, and they went like hot cakes. How can I go on a hunt with only seven bullets, all told?"

"Make your mind easy, Billie; he got them just as you asked him," Don went on.

"And they're here, then; tell me that and make me happy?" continued the fat boy.

"I'll get them for you when we go in the house; fact is, it's so hot just now I don't want to move any more than I have to. But all the signs point to a change in the weather to-night, and dad thinks it'll be a whole lot better to-morrow."

"Well, I just hope so," grumbled Billie, who had been industriously mopping his face with his red bandanna, which he kept knotted around his neck, regular cowboy fashion, loose enough so that it could be raised easily to his face, in case he got dust in his eyes while riding, and with only one hand free, which is the main idea cattle men have in wearing it that way.

"What was that?" demanded Adrian, as a slight

sound came to their ears, as of some one tripping over an obstacle near by.

All of them glanced around, and seeing nothing, made no move to get up and investigate; indeed, the warmth made them all more or less lazy, as Billie put it.

"Reckon one of the boys happens to be in the bunk house, and moved, that's all," Don remarked, carelessly; "though I thought they were all off on that run up to Saunders Knob, to dig out that water hole, and fix the barbed-wire fence we've got there, to keep the cattle out of that bad coulie where three steers have dropped over a trap, and broken their legs."

"May have been the Chink in the kitchen moving around," suggested Billie; but he meant no disrespect for Ah Chin Chin by speaking of him in this way, for he and the Mongolian were fast friends.

So they forgot the little incident; and yet, although none of them suspected it, there was fated to be a connection between that same tripping sound and their future, as will be made manifest in the proper time.

They lay there in the shade for a short time longer, talking, as boys will, of the numerous things they had passed through in common. Ever since Billie's arrival at Keystone Ranch he had been kept busy "seeing things," for it was understood between Mr. Mackay and Don that the stout boy needed plenty of exercise so as to harden his muscles, and reduce his abundant flesh. And Adrian

had also entered into the spirit of the thing with plenty of enthusiasm; so that Billie was half of the time really panting for breath.

"Anyhow, I weigh seven pounds less than when I came," he was boasting now, when Don showed some signs of getting up from the bench, as he saw his father come out of the house, and look around.

"Yes, and by the time you get pitched over the head of that bucking broncho of yours seven times more, you'll drop a whole lot of other pounds—that is, if you're lucky enough to keep from having your neck broken," Adrian went on to say.

"Where away now, Don?" asked Billie, who had only shrugged his broad shoulders at the remark made by the other chum.

"Dad beckoned to me, and I reckon he wants to ask me to do something," replied Don, moving off quickly.

"And I might as well be going into the house myself, and getting that ammunition, for my cartridge belt is nearly empty. Coming, Adrian?" asked Billie, making as if to get up, but being so slow about it that the other chum had to give him a boost.

"Why, yes, the sun's working around here now, and I'm sure it'll be some cooler in the house. Besides, I wouldn't mind a drink of that lemonade they always keep on tap here for thirsty boys," and so saying Adrian followed the example of Billie, only he was that agile he fairly seemed to bound to his feet.

Together they walked away, leaving the bunk house behind. And somehow it did not seem to occur to any one of the three boys to take a peep in at the door, to find out whether one of the rough riders had been left behind with a sore arm, or some slight sickness, when the whole bunch galloped away.

Had either Billie or Adrian but stepped around the corner just then they would have discovered a slinking figure flattened against the further wall of the bunk house, and evidently desirous of remaining unseen.

After the two boys had vanished inside the main building, beyond the broad white-washed porch, where the green screens hung, this man, dressed like a cow-puncher, slipped down along the wall of the dormitory, and crossing over to where a pony stood at the hitching fence, jumped on its back, and started easily away.

When he had gone some little distance from the ranch buildings, the rider turned in his saddle and made some sort of derisive gesture. Then he chuckled aloud, and slapped his flat hand down several times on his chaps, just as though hugely tickled over something.

No doubt had Don Mackay been a witness of these significant actions on the part of the spy, who had been hidden behind the bunk house while he and his chums were talking, he would have felt uneasy; for the man was Coots, the messenger from Double D. Ranch.

CHAPTER X.

A HUNT IN THE FOOTHILLS.

It was comparatively early on the following morning when the three Broncho Rider Boys galloped away from Keystone Ranch, and headed toward the west.

They carried a number of bundles attached to their saddles; and besides this, over their shoulders, sustained by straps, were their rifles.

Some of the cowboys gave them the customary range send-off, to which Don and his chums replied most heartily.

After that they rode along for some time in silence; for when passing over a stretch of ground where the alkali dust rose in clouds, it was always deemed advisable to keep one's mouth closed.

When, however, they finally came to better ground, where the buffalo grass grew in tufts, and the footing was firmer, they began to exchange remarks.

"I see you didn't think it worth while to bring a tent along, Don," Billie observed.

"No, I knew we'd only be out for a few nights, at most; and a pack horse or a burro is such a bother, you see," replied the other.

"Guess you're about right there, Don," Adrian put in; "anyhow, that's always been my experience when off on a trip. I'd rather do without some things than tote a pack horse along."

"Oh!" spoke up Billie," don't either of you go to thinking that I'm bothering my head about it. Reckon I c'n stand whatever's coming along. Give me my jolly old red blanket, and I'll snuggle down as cozy as you please."

He put his hand behind him, as he spoke, and patted the bundle that was secured just back of his saddle.

They went gaily on, indulging in all sorts of remarks, as light-hearted lads, out for a frolic, might be expected to do.

"Seems to me I remember this place," remarked Billie, pulling up suddenly.

"Course you do," Don went on to say; "because here's where we started across the sand strip, that time we followed the trail of the lost drove."

"It is, as sure as anything," Billie continued, "and do we strike out the same way now, Don?"

"No, I've laid my plans a little different, you see, boys," came the ready answer. "Some miles to the north of the hidden valley, that our fellows call the Pot, there's the best hunting to be had in this whole region."

"And you're aiming to reach that place, are you?" asked Billie, looking across the desert toward the rocky uplifts where they had had their recent adventure.

"Yes. We turn sharply to the right here, and ride along the edge of the sand for half an hour; then strike across. Just before we take to the desert there's a fine water hole, where we'll fill our canteens again, and let the hosses have their last drink. It's always hot work crossing that dead strip, let me tell you."

They were all willing to agree with Don before they got through, because the sun certainly did beat down on that sand hotter than anything they had ever seen.

But horses and riders were in prime condition for the venture, and finally the last of the gloomy desert sand had been left behind.

"This is something like," declared Adrian, as they stopped to rest the tired ponies in the shelter of the first clump of trees they came across.

"Whee! I'm nearly tuckered out, for a fact, fellows!" exclaimed Billie. "Look at the beads of sweat on my manly brow, would you? I've been wiping it off right along. Had to wring my hanky out again and again. All in all, I think I must have shed about a bucket of water in the last hour."

"You do look thin, for a fact," said Don, pretending to be serious.

"I wonder how much a bucket of water would weigh," said Adrian in a sort of speculative way; "because, if it's ten pounds or so, seems to me we've struck the easiest way yet to reduce Billie to a living skeleton."

"Yes," added Don, entering into the spirit of

the thing; "all we have to do is to rush him across this hot strip once a day for a few weeks, and we can send him back home in a sardine can."

"Well, I guess not," Billie hastened to remark, strenuously. "I object to that little game, and I hope you hear me. Talk about your Turkish bath, this beats it all hollow. And about my going home, please forget it, both of you. I'm having such a high old time out here in the cattle country that I just don't ever want to leave it, and my Broncho Rider pards."

"Shake on that, Billie; we feel about the same way you do!" declared Don.

"Yes, life would be pretty dull for both of us now, if you left us, Billie," Adrian went on to say.

The fat boy looked at him a little curiously, as though not quite sure how he ought to take that remark.

"Oh! I know my clumsy antics make lots of fun for you both," he observed, with a touch of irony in his voice; "but then, you know I can't help it if I am heavy and awkward. I didn't have a hand in the job, and I'm trying the best I know how to whittle down the pattern."

"Hold on there, Billie, you know that wasn't what Adrian meant," broke in Don. "We'd miss you because you're a generous, whole-hearted chap, always as good-natured as they make 'em, and willing to do your share in the work."

"Yes," spoke up Adrian," and lots of times Don and myself would have found time hang pretty

heavy on our hands only for the fun you made. But the ponies ought to be rested by now, and perhaps we'd better be moving along."

It was not a great while before the character of the ground began to change very much. The sandy waste had first of all given way to better soil, washed out of the gullies in the rocky hills; and here trees and grass grew.

A little later and they started to leave the lowlands and ascend the elevations, which Don assured them, were really foothills connected with the great mountains they could see in the distance, a spur of the Sierra Madre range of Northern Mexico.

They were now in the game country, as a number of indications told Don and Adrian.

Billie, being a greenhorn, would probably never have noticed these tracks, but all the same, when the others pointed them out, he was deeply interested.

"Here's where a deer jumped when it heard us coming," Don went on to say, as he reined in his broncho, and drew the others' attention to the ground.

"And a whopper, too," added Adrian, who knew all about these things because pretty much all his vacations had been spent in the West.

"Oh! why didn't he wait for us to come along?" complained Billie. "With me just crazy to knock over a ten-pronged buck with my new gun."

"You ought to have sent an invitation ahead then, and perhaps he might have obliged you, Billie," laughed Don.

"Plenty of time to get one while we're here," Adrian added, "though whether it'll be just a buck with ten prongs on his horns, is more than I'd like to promise. They're not so easy to stalk as younger "fellows."

They went on further, and presently Don again brought them to a halt.

"I'm not dead sure about it, boys," he whispered, "but I think there's a deer feeding in among the trees over yonder. Seemed to me I caught sight of him as we passed a little opening. His head was down at the time, too."

"Then you don't know whether he had ten prongs, do you, Don?" asked Billie, also dropping his voice, but at the same time showing signs of excitement.

"Well, hardly," answered the other, "and as we'd like some tender juicy venison to start with, I'd rather it turned out to be a yearling buck."

"Then you mean to try for him, do you, Don? continued Billie, hastening to slip out of his saddle, as he saw his chums doing.

"We sure do," came the quick reply.

"But Don, why hasn't this one skipped out, like the other did?" the tenderfoot persisted in asking.

"We've changed our course since then, and right now the wind's blowing straight from the feeding deer to us. But keep mum, Billie, and listen to me."

So Don gave whispered directions as to how they should approach the feeding deer. Billie was al-

lowed the easiest course. All he had to do was to keep straight on, creeping nearer and nearer, while Adrian circled to the right and the third hunter went to the left.

The first who found himself close enough for a good square shot, without any brush to interfere, was to take advantage of his opportunity.

" And we hope it'll be you, Billie," Adrian generously declared in the other's ear, as they prepared to separate, having hitched their ponies.

Now, Billie had been quite green at the time of his coming to Keystone Ranch, but during the three months of his stay he had practiced industriously with his fine up-to-date repeating rifle.

Sometimes his mark had been a set target, and Billie proved a very clever hand along these lines. Then again, one of the others would throw up a bottle for him to fire at, and practice had made Billie a pretty decent shot at a moving object. He had also shot a wolf, a number of coyotes, a big hawk, and plenty of jack rabbits, but his soul longed for greater triumphs.

When his companions left him, the fat boy began to climb the slight elevation, using all the skill he possessed in order to keep from making any sort of sound, such as might alarm the unsuspicious feeding deer.

He had his gun clutched in his hands. Every now and then Billie would come to a stop, and slowly elevating his rifle, aim at the spot where he believed the deer must be. Then he would thrust

his tongue into his cheek, as though tickled over the chance that was to be his, and go on.

Presently his arduous labor was rewarded, for he discovered the feeding deer just ahead. He could see it through a little opening among the branches of the overhanging trees, and the intervening bushes.

Just as he was thinking of resting his rifle against a tree trunk, and drawing a bead on the deer, back of its foreleg, as he had been told to always do, Billie heard a queer sound, as of a soft object striking against a limb.

It seemed to come from just above him, and naturally the boy raised his eyes to see what sort of squirrel could be frisking about in such a strange way.

What he discovered sent the cold chills racing up and down Billie's spine.

CHAPTER XI.

A DANGEROUS CUSTOMER.

Up to that time Billie had never as yet set eyes on a real live panther except in the Central Park zoo. But he knew he was looking at one the minute he saw that sleek gray form sprawled upon the limb, not ten feet above his head.

The animal's tail was jerking from one side to the other, and the sound it made was what had come to Billie's ears.

He saw the yellow eyes staring angrily at him, and Billie knew at once that the big woods cat was in anything but a good temper.

The cause was very plain. Cats, big and little, have to eat just so often; and this one being hungry, had possibly set out to stalk the feeding deer at about the same time the three chums did.

Instinct told the beast what reasoning powers had caused Don and Adrian to know—that the only way to creep close up on a deer, with his sensitive sense of smell, was to advance *into the wind!*

Poor Billie was dreadfully shocked to find himself brought face to face with such a terrible wild beast, and when he had never dreamed of such a thing.

Of course he forgot all about the deer. If his life was in danger it was his first duty to look out for himself.

He thought of backing away. Perhaps, if the wily panther saw that he did not mean to make trouble it would allow him to withdraw.

Then Billie remembered something that caused him to change his mind. He had companions near by. What if one of them chanced to cross the path of the hungry beast, and not being so lucky as he was, might know nothing of his danger until the big cat with the terrible claws and teeth pounced upon his back?

That settled the matter.

Billie at once decided that he had a duty to perform. What was the use of possessing a splendid six-shot magazine rifle, if he declined to use it?

Yes, he must show what he was made of now, and instead of retreating, send a bullet clear through the crouching beast.

So Billie began to slowly elevate his gun, although his hands trembled considerably while so doing, and his heart seemed to climb up into his very throat every time the panther growled, as it did frequently.

He was trying the best he knew how to remember all Don had told him to do under similar conditions. As soon as his finger pressed the trigger he was to roll over several times, because the chances were the animal would jump at him, even though it had received its death wound.

This part of his instructions was so impressed

on Billie's mind that when a gun was discharged close by, he somehow started to roll over with the utmost zeal, regardless of any scratches he might receive in so doing.

He had managed to keep hold of his rifle through it all, and as he sat up, to discover Don looking at him in amazement, Billie burst out with:

"Where is the old sneaker, Don? Which way did he jump?"

At that Don laughed.

"Reckon you must be dreaming, Billie," he said.

"But somebody shot right close by," the other went on.

"That was me," said Don, "and unless I'm mistaken I managed to get my deer, too. I saw him give one big spring, and then fall over. Just then you came rolling out of that brush like a log."

"But the panther, Don?"

"Panther?" echoed the other, more astonished than ever now.

"Sure thing. Didn't you see him jump, then?" demanded Billie.

"Not a thing," replied Don. "If you ran across a cat, tell me about it."

This Billie proceeded to do, and as Adrian had come up by that time he stood there, also listening.

Now Billie was not a very clever story teller, though he believed he had reason to do his best right then. He could plainly see that his chums

were not inclined to wholly believe him; not that they thought Billie would say what was untrue; but he was a great fellow to *imagine things.*

Perhaps he had seen some knotty protuberance up in a tree that he just fancied resembled a crouching wild beast. And then came the sudden shot that had startled him so badly.

"Now, you don't believe me one whit," declared the fat boy, indignantly. "Can't I tell it on both of your faces. But let's go back to where I was, and see if I can't prove every word true. It was a panther, a sure enough one too, or else—well, I'll agree to eat my hat. Come on, boys, who's afraid?"

Billie was bold enough now, in the presence of his chums. He had apparently recovered from the temporary panic into which that sudden shot had thrown him. Besides, the panther was undoubtedly gone by now, anyway.

So Don and Adrian followed him, exchanging sundry winks and nods meanwhile, as though they fully expected that Billie would quickly realize his mistake, now that he meant to look at things in a calm and deliberate way.

"Now, here's where I was on my hands and knees, acreepin' up so quiet like, when first thing I knew I heard a tail whacking away on a limb, and looking up I saw his yellow eyes astarin' right at me."

Billie pointed to where they could plainly discern the marks of his knees in the soil.

"And when you looked up, Billie where did you

think you saw the panther?" Adrian went on to say, pleasantly.

"Didn't think—I tell you I saw him as plain as I do the nose on your face, Adrian," was Billie's protest.

"Where?"

"See that big limb up yonder?" Billie flashed. "well, he was stretched along that, just like he was waiting for the deer to come feeding in this direction."

Again the other two boys exchanged glances.

"Just what a sly cat would have done," asserted Adrian, nodding; "and the wind this way too."

"Climb the tree, and see if it ain't so," persisted Billie, who did not like to have his chums believe he had imagined things that had no foundation.

"A good idea, and I'll try it. Here, hold my gun, Adrian."

So saying Don started to climb the tree.

"Better be ready to give him a shot if he bobs up again, Adrian," said Billie, as he himself took up a waiting position, with his rifle to his shoulder. "You never can tell what these same tricky cats are going to do. Like as not he's hiding somewhere up there among the branches right now."

"Oh! I guess not, if he jumped when Don fired," but all the same Adrian kept his eyes on the watch, and his rifle ready for immediate use.

He had had considerable experience with these fierce animals, and knew that as a rule they were not to be treated contemptuously.

Meanwhile Don, ascending the trunk of the tree, speedily reached the limb along which Billie had claimed to have seen the gray panther stretched.

His two chums were following his movements eagerly, so that they could see when Don got down closer, as if to examine the bark.

"Find any sign up there, Don?" asked Adrian.

"I sure do," came the quick reply.

"See that!" exclaimed Billie, his face lighting up with the satisfaction that comes in having one's word proven. "Didn't I tell you?"

"Scratches, Don?" continued the third chum.

"And fresh ones at that," came the reply.

"Then something *was* up there, as sure as you live," Adrian went on to say.

"Wasn't it a panther, Don?" begged Billie.

"No other animal could have made these scratches, because they show a pretty big set of claws," the boy in the tree continued, so that Billie's round freckled face fairly glowed with the vindication.

"Where d'ye suppose he went to?" asked Adrian.

"Jumped to the ground, to the right I reckon, because Billie was lying a little to the left. Take a look, and see if you can find where he landed, while I'm dropping out of this tree."

Adrian was already making in the direction indicated. A short time later and he gave tongue.

"Here's where he struck, boys. Come and see the plain print of all four feet close together. Then

he must have slunk away, crouching down low, because here's his trail, as plain as dirt."

The others eagerly followed what he was pointing out, Billie especially showing the greatest interest. Some of those ancestors, Billie believed, must have had sporting blood in their veins, too, for it had long been working in his system.

"Perhaps he ain't so far away but what we'll start him up," he suggested, as he looked all around, and kept a quivering forefinger on the trigger of his gun.

Adrian, about this time called their attention to a thick copse of greasewood brush ahead.

"If you asked me," he remarked, "I'd say that was just about the place a panther would pick out, to lay low in, when enemies were around."

"Whew! but you don't expect a fellow to walk right in there, I hope!" cried Billie, shrinking from the task.

"We'll try some other plan to force him out," said Don.

"Yes," added Adrian, "you two pass by, and take up positions on the other side, where you can have a clear view. Billie, you keep to the left, while Don has the right. When you get fixed give a whoop."

"And what will you do then?" demanded Don, as though hardly knowing whether he ought to let the other take all the risk, or not.

"Me? Why, I'll throw stones in the brush, and holler. If that don't fetch him out I might even

fire off my gun a few times. But keep on your guard, both of you; and try to fetch him with the first shot, because a wounded panther is a bad job for any one to tackle. I'd rather he got clear away than that you just hurt him, and made him ugly. Go ahead, and leave the rest to me."

Thus urged Don and Billie skirted the greasewood brush, one on either side, and took up positions a little way beyond.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT BILLIE DID.

"READY?" called out Adrian, presently.

"All right here!" Don was heard to say.

"Me too!" exclaimed Billie, as he shut his teeth hard, and tried to conquer the quivering of his muscles.

He had his eyes glued on that dense patch of bushes into which his comrades had declared the panther's trail led.

Would the savage beast come out with a great bound, and could he possibly succeed in hitting him while in mid air? Billie remembered that he had broken quite a few bottles that his obliging chums had tossed up for him; but then there was a certain knack in that style of shooting—you had to fire just at the instant the object attained its highest pitch, and for a part of a second it could be said to be stationary.

But how about a leaping panther? That was another proposition entirely. And somehow just then Billie found himself ardently wishing that he could transform his repeating rifle into a shot-gun, with buckshot in the charges; for then he would

have no less than twelve chances, against the single one on which perhaps his very life might depend now.

He was given little time for reflection, however.

Adrian must have gotten to work with some vigor, for a crash in the midst of the bushes announced the arrival of the first good-sized stone.

"Look out for him, boys!"

With that a second rock made quite a racket in the thicket.

"Hey! wake up there, Mr Panther, and get a move on you!" Adrian went on calling, as he continued to bombard the spots where he thought it most likely the animal might be lying low.

Still, as yet there had been no sign of the beast. Billie began to feel a sense of bitter disappointment. Why, if only the panther would show up he believed he would willingly take all chances of a single shot.

But it began to look as though the big cat must have left the covert before they came to it. If so he would be far away by this time, and quite safe from their rifles.

It was really too bad.

Billie even wished now that Adrian might break his way into the densest part of the bush pack, in order to make sure there was nothing there.

He found himself wondering how it would do for him to send a few shots into the patch, himself. That might alarm the panther much more than the dropping of stones could do.

Billie, possessed of this new idea, was just about

to pick out a good place where his shot could do no damage to either of his chums, both of whom he could plainly see from his shelter.

Then he held his hand, and it seemed as though a hot flush passed completely over him. Surely something had moved just back of that leafy screen! Yes, there it was again, and this time it could not be a mistake.

Billie gently swung his new repeating Marlin gun around so that he covered the place where he had seen that suspicious movement.

Then, even as he looked, he saw the terrible head of the panther appear, quickly followed by its entire form. Five seconds later, and the beast crouched there before his very eyes, his long tail again lashing back and forth, as though in anger.

Perhaps the panther considered it good policy to beat a retreat when beset by so many human enemies, but it was certain that he hated to show the white feather.

Billie saw that it was up to him to do his best. Such a chance might never come his way again. And if he allowed the animal to start away Don might not get such a splendid shot as was now offered to him.

So he looked along the barrel of his rifle until he could make sure that the bead was covering the flank of the half-crouching beast.

Billie had his teeth set, and was determined not to shut his eyes, or flinch when his finger pressed the trigger.

Well, that second of hesitation must have been an eternity to him. His gun seemed to move up and down ever so slightly; and yet he was not conscious of drawing even a single breath while he knelt there, taking aim.

Then came the shock of the discharge, and somehow Billie just seemed to know, with a hunter's instinct perhaps, that he had fired at a time when his aim was quite true.

Remembering how often Don and Adrian had warned him against being caught with an empty gun after firing a shot, Billie began frantically to work the lever, so as to eject the useless shell, and push another into the chamber.

So clumsily did he work that he would surely have blocked the operation, and rendered his weapon useless, only that the cleverness of the gun maker had provided against for all that.

Don came tearing around one end of the bush patch, while Adrian was hurrying up from the other direction.

"What luck, Billie?" shouted the former, as he ran, looking all around him for some signs of the panther.

"I must have hit him!" cried Billie, excitedly; "but I didn't see him again after I shot. Oh! I hope he won't get away. That ought to be *my* panther, because all the chances keep coming my way."

"Well, you had your try," said Adrian.

"Where was he when you shot, Billie?" asked Don, more sympathetic than the other chum.

"Right up against the bushes," said the disappointed marksman. "He walked out just as big as a house, and I had the best chance any one could ask. If I lost him I just deserve it; but Don, I had a bead on him when I pulled the trigger, I give you my word I did."

"And didn't shut your eyes, or flinch even a little bit, Billie?" demanded Adrian.

Before the fat chum could frame the indignant reply that was trembling on his lips, Don was heard to cry out:

"Yes, you hit him all right, Billie!"

"How do you know, Don?" quavered the one who had shot, as, gun in hand he started on the run to where the other stood.

"Why, here you can see blood spots on the leaves," Don went on to declare, pointing the infallible signs out at the same time.

"But where is he now, then?" asked Billie.

"I think he made a quick spring back into the bushes. Listen! I can hear something moving right in there!" Don exclaimed.

"Oh!" cried Billie, thrusting his gun out as though he fully expected to see the wounded panther come springing into view.

After waiting for a full minute without anything happening, while Adrian had hurried around so as to discover the beast if he chanced to leave the bushes on the other side, Don advanced cautiously.

"Take care, Don!" warned Billie, when he saw the other take a step into the cover.

Another step, two, three more, Don took. Then he was seen to crane his neck as though looking beyond. And after that he waved his hand toward Billie, actually beckoning for him to approach.

Trembling now from a new cause, expectancy rather than alarm, Billie started into the patch of bushes to where his chum awaited him.

"Look there, will you?" said Don.

And Billie, peering over the top of a bedraggled bush, saw stretched upon the ground the body of the lithe animal that had so recently appeared to him as the embodiment of fierceness, cunning and strength.

He had difficulty in believing his eyes.

"Is he really dead, Don, and did I get him?" he asked, in a weak voice.

"Well, from the looks of him I'd say he was a goner," replied Don; and then elevating his voice he called out! "I say, Adrian, it's all right! Come here!"

So Adrian came on the full run, apparently greatly pleased to know that Billie had actually killed the terror of the foothills, and one of the greatest enemies a ranchman could ever have.

Together they bent down and looked to see where Billie's bullet had entered the side of the dead animal.

"Right back of the shoulder, too!" affirmed Adrian.

"I defy anybody to beat that shot!" ventured Don, as each of them in turn solemnly wrung Billie's hand in congratulation.

"And the best of it all is that I never had the least rest for my old Marlin gun, but just blazed away as if shooting panthers was a regular daily diet with Billie Winkle," remarked the proud victor, who was doubtless enjoying that moment more than any other he had ever before known.

Taking hold of the panther they dragged him into the open.

"And now, if my deer's lying where I think it is," remarked Adrian, "what's to hinder us from making camp right here, and spending our first night in the foothills close by? We can get water without going away; and our ponies are too tired to carry us much further."

"I say yes to that," Don went on to observe.

"Besides," added Adrian, "this seems to be pretty fair hunting ground."

"Fair," burst out the happy Billie, as he stroked the velvety side of the panther that had fallen to his gun, "I never heard of as good a place for game. Why just think of it, would you, a deer and a big cat, all inside of ten minutes? Goodness knows what else we're liable to run across before long. Say, do you think we might scare up a grizzly bear, Don? While my hand's in I'd like to have a try at the biggest game you've got around here."

At that the other two looked at each other and burst into a laugh.

"He's coming on right fast, don't you think, Don?" asked Adrian.

"The rest of us might as well take back seats while Billie's around," added Don; "but come, let's get busy and make camp here."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DANCING STAR.

"THIS is what I call fine!" Billie was saying, later on that same evening.

They had left it to him to start a fire, while Don removed the skin from the body of the dead panther, and Adrian carved up the young deer.

Now they were sitting there, each one taking it as easy as possible, and enjoying as good a supper as hunters could want. Billie prided himself on his ability to make coffee, and his chums were agreed that there was reason for his boast. And the steaks cut from the young buck that had been so foolish as to continue to browse on the sweet grass, while all sorts of enemies were creeping up on him, why, when it was taken smoking hot from the pan, and done to a brown turn, it made their mouths fairly water.

"Worth coming for," Adrian admitted, as well as he could with his mouth full.

"Beats everything all hollow!" was what Don remarked; and so it seemed agreed on all sides that the outing gave promise of being a record one.

Indeed, since they had already secured such remarkable results, this went without a question.

And there might be some excuse for Billie expecting to meet up with even a great grizzly bear before they returned home, some days later.

Although they had carefully refrained from saying anything about it before Billie, not wishing to arouse his fears to any extent, or disturb the satisfaction he seemed to be getting out of the outing, Don and his other chum had several times discussed the chances of their being visited in the night by some prowling person, whose room would be far more preferable than his company.

In other words, Mr. Mackay had asked them to be careful how they slept unguarded because it was believed that from time to time certain cattle rustlers who were afraid to venture among the ranches in that section of country, had places of hiding among those same foothills.

From time to time some of the boys belonging to Keystone Ranch had reported mysterious doings in this quarter. Horsemen had been seen riding along the foot of the hills, who might be cowboys belonging to some ranch; but their actions were on a par with those of men who wished to remain out of reach of their fellows. Don and Adrian had promised to exercise at least ordinary caution. They knew that some of these same cattle thieves had no love for the proprietor of Keystone Ranch who in times past had made it pretty lively for their breed; indeed, three men had been railroaded to prison because of trying to steal cattle belonging to Mr. Mackay. He had thus won a reputation for

prompt dealing with such riff-raff who pestered his neighbors; and there were many who would welcome a chance to pay back the debt they owed him by doing something to annoy his son and heir, Don.

So even while they sat there, apparently taking their ease, both of the boys were always on the alert. Neither of them allowed his gun to stray far from his hand; but Billie, in the innocence of his guileless heart failed to notice anything out of the way.

They had eaten all they could, and still there was plenty left. No danger of any one starving while Billie had anything to do with the cooking—and the supplies held out.

Adrian pretended to observe some of these signs with alarm.

"Too bad," he remarked, trying to pull a long face, as he surveyed Billie from head to feet, "too bad that you no sooner knock off a few pounds before you start right to work trying to put it on again."

"How?" demanded Billie, with a light twinkling in the corner of his mischievous eyes.

"Well," Adrian went on to say, "you admitted dropping a bucket of weight while crossing that hot desert, and we had it all fixed so that you could repeat the trip as often as you felt like; but here you weigh just as much as ever. Tell you what, Billie, to do the thing up right you ought to cut out eating altogether."

"I see myself," scoffed the fat boy. "Why,

what would be the use of living at all if you couldn't enjoy a meal once in a while?"

"It would wind us up in a big hurry," said Adrian; "but you might hang on for a few weeks. You could live on yourself, Billie. But joking aside, I think we've all enjoyed that supper to the limit. How about the fire, Don?"

"Let it die down from now on; we sure won't need it to keep us warm, you know," and he gave the other a sly wink, as much as to say that until it became necessary there was really no use in saying anything so direct as to alarm the tenderfoot.

So they continued to lounge there, talking in low tones, and enjoying the comfort of just doing nothing. The three bronchos were feeding close at hand; indeed, each of them had been secured by a rope so as to prevent straying; and besides this, Don had educated his Wireless to stamp his hoofs, and by shrill little neighs indicate the presence of a stranger in the vicinity, which fact would be betrayed by the animal's sense of smell, almost as keen as that of a deer or rabbit hound.

It was Billie who startled his companions presently by remarking:

"Well, if that ain't the first time I ever saw a star moving right before my eyes."

"Where? Whatever do you mean?" demanded Adrian; while Don also sat up quickly, as though interested in such a wonderful phenomenon.

Billie liked to be the center of attraction; it pleased his sense of importance. And there are

heaps of persons nowadays who care very little just how they do it, or whether they are looked upon as freaks, just so they can keep in the public eye. Billie pretended to look as though it was not so strange an event after all.

"P'raps lots of stars do that jump dance around down here," he went on; "seems to be lots of things that are different here to what I'm used to."

"I see it!" said Don, with a quick intake of breath, that told his chum Adrian he found reason for thinking there was something more than "queer" connected with the star that seemed to be bent on dancing a jig, or the latest turkey-trot step.

"Yes, and so do I now," Adrian went on; "and your crazy star, Billie, what d'ye think it is, but a man waving a torch, or a lantern, or something of that kind."

"Well, I declare, does the railroad run up there, and is he signaling for the freight engine to back up?" asked Billie, after he too had spent a dozen seconds in watching the movements of the mysterious light.

Of course the other boys had to chuckle at this question, though they both suspected that Billie had asked it in a pure spirit of fun; for he was not that green. And since they would have to speak plainly from now on, they saw that it was next to useless to think they could keep the danger from their comrade.

"That man is sending some sort of message down

to others, who may be on a lower level," said Don, positively. Now, we don't know who these parties are; perhaps a bunch of honest cowboys from some ranch, hunting missing steers. It might be our old friend Mardo Mendosa, when he found that he couldn't steal anything from the well-guarded Keystone Ranch, turned his attention in other quarters."

"But we don't mean to take any chances, do we, Don?" Billie inquired.

"That's just what we don't," was the quick response. "We're out here on a little hunt, and so far as we can help it we don't expect to bother with anybody's business; but at the same time we'd be foolish if we neglected the most ordinary precautions known to hunters, Indian fighters, and cowboys all over the West and Southwest."

"Oh! now I see why you said you'd let the fire go out!" cried Billie; at which Don grinned and nodded, while Adrian pretended to clap his hands as though in this way he would applaud the other's brightness.

"You're getting there, Billie, and learning all the time," he said, and in such a sincere tone that the fat boy actually blushed with pleasure, and placing his hand on his heart he bowed toward Adrian.

"But that's only one thing we mean to do, you see," Don went on to say.

"Sure," Billie remarked, as carelessly as though he knew the whole programme from beginning to end, and had been through it many a time.

"Pretty soon we'll make a little change of base,

after we've kicked out the last few red embers of the fire."

"A change of base?" murmured Billie, evidently perplexed.

"We'll take our bronchos, and move along a few hundred yards in the dark," continued Don. "Adrian and myself picked out the exact place before dark set in; and we don't expect to have any trouble getting there."

"But—what's the idea; I don't just ketch on?" asked the tenderfoot, compelled to "come down off his high horse," in order to grasp the meaning of this strange action on the part of his chums; for that particular spot seemed just the finest for spending the night that could be found, according to his notion.

"If they've located our fire," Adrian explained, "and mean to pay the camp a visit later in the night, why, don't you see, they'll find only a blank, empty void here. We'll be apt to sleep the better, anyhow, if we're further away, and hidden in the darkness."

"Now I understand it all," said Billie, looking relieved to know that they were not intending to take a gallop of many miles, for he was very tired after that hot ride across the desert.

They told him other things that Billie might with profit absorb, all of which were connected with woodcraft, and the art of hiding a trail when enemies were believed to be around.

Billie really and truly wanted to learn, and he

took in all that he heard with an eagerness that quite rewarded the boys for their trouble.

"And now, let's get ready to move," said Don, finally. "We don't want to stay here a minute too long, because we have no way of telling who that chap was signaling to, or what their number may be. The only thing for us to do is to disappear. Get the duffle together, boys, while I bring in the ponies; and Adrian, I'll leave the treading out of the fire to you."

It was all done quietly, and without the least bit of fuss. Somehow even Billie found himself influenced by the undisturbed manner of his two comrades, and on this account he was able to keep his thumping heart in subjection, as they prepared to leave the spot.

The swinging light far up the rise had gone now. Evidently the unknown who had thus signaled must have received some sort of answer to his efforts.

Not a spark of the fire could be seen after Adrian stamped on the ashes; and the only sign of recent human presence was the odor of cooking that still lingered in the vicinity, as it often will, when the night air is especially heavy.

Then each one of the Broncho Rider Boys, leading his pony, moved silently away, passing into the dense darkness like shadows, with Adrian in the lead, and Don bringing up the rear. Even the intelligent animals seemed to understand that there was some need of silence, for they neither whinnied nor neighed as they stalked in the wake of their young masters.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE COILS OF A LARIAT.

"You said it wasn't going to be far, didn't you, Adrian?" asked Billie, after they had been moving along in this way for some ten minutes, and he had stumbled almost as many times over unseen obstacles.

"Not so loud, Billie!" returned the one addressed, and who led the van; "yes, I said it wasn't so very far away, and to prove it I'm going to stop in another minute; ain't that so, Don?"

And the boy in the rear grunted an assent. He was having troubles of his own—every one did who tried to follow close in the wake of clumsy Billie, particularly when he was walking over an unknown trail, in the pitch darkness of night, and leading an unwilling broncho. There was forever a chance that boy and pony might drop in a wriggling heap, to form a trap for the unwary follower.

"That suits me first rate," declared Billie, just bound to talk, even if it had to be to himself, and in whispers; "because I'm *aw*ful tired. Seems like I could hardly put one leg in front of the other, right now. Just one minute more, you said, didn't

you, Adrian? But that's a whole sixty seconds. Gee! I don't know *when* I've felt this heavy."

"I told you how it would be, when you kept on eating like sixty," was the only consolation he received from over Adrian's shoulder; "and now for goodness sake keep still, Billie, and do some tall thinking for a change."

"Guess I will," chuckled the fat boy, subsiding into temporary silence.

"This looks like the place we picked out, eh, Don?" remarked the leader, a short time later on, as he came to a halt.

"Yes, you're right," replied a voice from the rear.

"Ain't I glad, though!" said Billie, as he immediately dropped down on the ground as if to try and see if it was as soft as the camp site they had just left.

"We'll try and stake out our horses as well as we can in this faint light," observed Adrian.

"Huh! you fellows must have the eyes of a cat to see anything around here," grumbled Billie, who seemed in a queer mood for one of his usual jolly disposition. "Why, it's as black as the inside of my hat, to me; and say, if there's any such a thing as a ghost, I'd like to wager we'll run across a good healthy specimen of the same right here. Where you going now, fellows?" he added in sudden alarm, as he noticed his two chums moving off in different directions.

"Keep right where you are," ordered Don;

"we're just going to put our ponies out to graze, with their ropes to keep them within bounds. I'll come back soon, and fix your mount the same way, if you'll only be good, Billie."

"Oh! I'll be anything you please, if only I'm let sit right here till I get my breath back," cooed the other, satisfied to just rest after the exertion of climbing from the lower level, since the ground had been rising all the time.

In a short time the three ponies had been staked out where they could nibble the short grass that grew here and there in spots. This was apt to keep them contented, and later on, no doubt they would lie down to rest.

The boys had everything with them—blankets, cooking utensils, guns, and what few other things they had seen fit to bring along with them on the trip. And when Billie was able to wrap his beloved red blanket doubly about his plump person, and feel its warmth, he soon became his old self.

They were all tired, and did not mean to sit there very long, talking in low tones. Indeed, no matter how much they discussed the strange occurrence connected with that moving light, they found themselves no nearer a solution of the mystery. Who the man was, making the signal up on the side of the elevation; and why he sent this message to others below, seemed bound to remain a puzzle, so far as the Broncho Rider Boys were concerned.

Pretty soon Billie was observed to be fast asleep. Don discovered this interesting fact when he heard

his loud and steady breathing, upon receiving no reply to a question he asked the fat boy.

"Let him sleep," remarked Adrian, when told this fact; "the poor chap needs it, you know, Don. He's managed to keep going right along with us through the whole blessed day, which has been a terribly hot one. And it means a whole lot more for Billie to travel six or eight hours, carrying all the weight he does, than either of us can guess. He's a gritty one, don't you forget it."

"Yes, and the jolliest chum ever," added Don, with a vein of real affection in his voice.

"That's right; you never spoke truer words," the other continued, approvingly. "But what say, Don, hadn't we better get ready to follow his example? I'm some tired myself, and this blanket feels mighty good to me right now. The air gets a little nippy nights down here, so that when you're bundled up snug and tight, you just feel like taking forty-seven winks. Are you in, Don?"

"Can we depend on the ponies to keep guard, Adrian?" asked the other, who was also wrapping his warm blanket about him, having selected the place where he meant to stretch out.

"I'm not so sure about my Ten Spot and Billie's Maudie; but you've sure got the greatest sentry in that Wireless broncho that ever was. I've heard the boys tell what a wonder he is, and how they'd sooner have him on guard than any sleepy cow-puncher in the business."

"Thanks!" replied Don, undoubtedly pleased to

hear his pony praised, for he had taught Wireless all the smart animal knew. "Then let's turn in, and see how it feels to pick up a little sleep. Remember to touch me, if you hear anything suspicious, Adrian, because I reckon you sleep lighter than I do. And I'm rolling over so as to be inside reaching distance of you. Good-night, old chum; I'm off!"

Adrian was the last to go to sleep. Long he lay awake there, listening to the various well remembered sounds of the night, as they came floating to his ears from near or from far. How he loved them all, and what sweet music they made when the tired body was resting after a hard day's work, while the active mind refused to quiet down.

But at last he too passed over the border into dreamland.

Some time later Don felt his comrade punching him in the side.

"Yes, I'm awake; what is it?" he whispered.

"Listen and you'll hear distant voices from below," remarked Adrian, whispering the words so as not to arouse Billie.

"I get them all right," replied Don; "and seems like they come from our old camp ground, eh, Adrian?"

"That's the ticket!" chuckled the other; "and we played the game just right to make our sneak when we did. They're all upset by not finding us anywhere near where the ashes of our fire lie."

"Sounds like they might be some mad about it,"

remarked Don. "You don't think they'll come up here looking for us, do you, Adrian?"

"Not one chance in a thousand," replied the other. "And even if they did, we can depend on our four-footed sentry to tell us. There, the talking seems to be dying out again; and like as not the men, whoever they may be, have gone away. Here's to get another fine nap, Don."

And so saying he turned over, as though fully contented to take things as they came. Don could do nothing less, and consequently in a short time the three lads were sound asleep.

So the long night crept on, and daylight found them safe and sound. Billie was keen to ask questions, and in this manner he soon learned that strangers had visited the lower camp during the night, their excited voices telling how disappointed they were at not finding the Broncho Rider Boys at home.

"I wonder, now, if this sort of thing's going to keep up right along," Billie went on to say, with a sober face after he had soaked in the facts. "If we have to dodge a lot of sneaking thieves, and all-round rascals, every night we're up here in these old foothills, our trip won't be the picnic we expected."

"That's a fact, Billie," remarked Adrian; "but think what a lot of useful information you're going to pick up, if that turns out to be the case. When we go back home you'll know heaps more'n you did when we started out. The boys'll be calling you a first class scout, instead of a tenderfoot."

This gave Billie room for thought, and he seemed to become fairly reconciled to the existing condition of things.

They concluded to make a smokeless fire in a depression near by, and cook some breakfast. It was just after he had finished eating that Don made the discovery which caused him to determine to take a little scout down the hill in the direction of their first camp-fire ashes. He had dropped his hunting knife in the darkness, somewhere, and as he valued it highly, he hated to let it go.

"Keep your eyes about, for they may have camped around there somewhere," was the warning Adrian wafted after him, as, gun in hand, the cattleman's son started back over their late trail.

Don kept his eyes on the alert as he walked slowly along, for it was always possible that he might have dropped his knife while leading his horse up the hill; perhaps some bush had caught the haft, and drawn the blade from the leather sheath at his belt; stranger things than that had happened in the experience of Don Mackay.

As he drew near the spot where they had eaten supper he was still minus his prized knife; and this made it look as though he must have left it where he had been using the knife to cut his cooked venison. Don wondered whether those unwelcome visitors who had thought to surprise the sleepers could have picked it up. He hoped not, since that would likely mean he might never see it again.

Now he had reached the spot, and there were the

ashes marking the remains of the camp-fire. Don looked around eagerly, but at first failed to see his knife. He did however notice plain prints of feet in the soil, and knew that the tracks had been made by others than himself and two chums.

Don was inclined to get down and study these footprints, for he had learned how to read such marks, and could work out a whole story just from a trail that would have been like so much Greek to Billie, for instance. But just then, greatly to his delight, he saw his lost knife lying in plain view on the ground.

With a low cry of delight the boy sprang forward to pick up his treasured possession, about which clustered many fond recollections of past outings.

He did not see the bushes move back of him, as he thus bent over, nor notice the tall figure that arose, rope in hand.

The first intimation Don had of the peril that hung over his head was when, rising after recovering possession of his lost knife, he caught the suspicious sound of a rope hissing through the air. Before he could so much as duck his head, or jump aside, the loop of the lariat dropped over his head, and tightened around his arms."

CHAPTER XV.

JUST IN TIME.

So quickly did the lariat encircle Don, that the boy was really given no time for thinking. True, he had been brought up on a ranch, and the peculiar whirr of a rope passing swiftly through the air was no unfamiliar sound in his ears; but in this instance he had just barely guessed what it meant than he found himself rendered practically helpless.

As luck would have it, both of his arms were pinned to his sides, so that his gun, which he had been trailing with him, dropped to the ground; and while he still clutched the recovered knife in his fingers, he was utterly unable to reach the coils of that rope with its keen edge, much as he desired to do so.

Then there was a rude jolt that caused Don to sway forward. Only his nimbleness of foot prevented him from being thrown upon his face, as the unknown who had so skillfully trapped him doubtless intended should be the case.

In a difficulty of this sort there is generally only one slender chance for the party in the noose to untangle himself. He must manage to run toward

the lariat thrower so fast that he will get a slack line, and in this way it is sometimes possible to spread the tight loop, and throw it off.

To prevent this the thrower always has his wits about him, and takes in the slack as fast as it is created; at the same time trying to throw his victim. When the roper happens to be mounted on a pony, as is generally the case, he has little difficulty in accomplishing his aim; but it is somewhat harder to do when afoot.

Don had no chance given him to even hazard a single guess as to the identity of his unseen enemy. He did not care to know just then. It might be some Mexican cattle rustler; or a cowboy belonging to the Double D. Ranch, ready to play him a scurvy trick in order to please the son of his boss, Clement Derring.

That knife had evidently acted in the nature of a stall. It must have been discovered by this man, and placed where Don had found it later, under the belief that the original owner was more than likely to return, to search for it.

Well, Don had walked into the clever little trap like an innocent, and it began to look as though he would have to pay the penalty for his rashness, whatever form or shape that might assume.

The boy might have shouted, only that he was given no chance. It all came so unheralded that he was being hustled along by jerks of the rope before he could collect his wits.

Then there was a greater lurch than any that

had preceded it; and Don, getting his legs entangled in some sort of creeping vine, with his roped arms helpless to aid him in maintaining his balance, fell forward.

This was the critical instant when the party at the other end of the rope was supposed to leap quickly forward, and finish his capture by either throwing himself upon the victim, or knocking him violently on the head.

And as a figure jumped out from the low screen of some bushes just then, it began to look as though Don would find himself a complete prisoner in another three seconds.

But it happened that neither Don nor the unknown thrower of the lariat had counted on a certain thing. This was the loyalty and curiosity of Billie.

He had heard Don state the fact of his loss, and that he believed he would take a little stroll down to the old camp, in the hopes of running across his missing knife somewhere.

Now, Billie had been practicing a number of hunter ways for some time, and like an inspiration it flashed upon him that here would be a splendid chance to try if he could follow after the keen-eared Don at a certain distance, without the latter being aware of the fact.

It was rather a dangerous proceeding, for a fact, this stalking a friend, when that comrade had a gun in his hand, and enemies were supposed to have been close by within a few hours; but then Billie could not be supposed to know that. He was like a great

simple child in some ways, trusting and innocent, yet firm in his allegiance to his chums.

And indeed, he must have managed to get along in a pretty clever fashion, for not once had Don discovered his presence. Remembering the instructions given him in case he were advancing toward a feeding deer, up the wind from him, Billie had kept his eye firmly fixed upon Don, and the instant he believed the other showed signs of turning his head, Billie would stand perfectly still, in the belief that like the deer, Don would pass him by as a stump.

Now Billie had been told to watch the deer's tail always, and the instant he saw it give a quick little movement, to stand as he was; for that was a sign the animal was about to raise its head. He obeyed instructions so literally as a rule that for the moment Billie hardly knew how he was to tell when Don meant to look around, because there was no tail to watch; but he finally compromised by observing his comrade's head, and just guessed that it would turn once in so often.

At any rate Billie had actually managed to follow Don all the way down from the new camp without being discovered.

The fat boy was fairly bubbling over with delight at his wonderful success. He hardly knew whether to acquaint Don with the fact of his being so near by giving a sudden yell, or simply speaking the other's name.

It was while revolving this in his mind, and trying

to determine which way would be the better one, that he saw Don start forward suddenly.

Billie knew from this that he had discovered the missing knife; and standing there he watched the other stoop to pick it up. Then came that sudden queer whistling sound that made Billie think some bird had started to giving note. To his utter amazement he saw Don staggering about, and that he seemed to be fast at the end of a swaying rope that ran over to the bushes beyond.

Before his startled eyes was enacted that sharp little border drama, with Don being made the victim; and which ended in his being violently thrown to the ground.

It was then that Billie awoke to the truth, for he saw the figure of a man leap hurriedly out of the bushes, and make for the struggling form of his overthrown chum. So he had watched cowboys advance upon the thrown steer, branding iron in hand, to clap the same upon his flank, and leave the well-known keystone mark in the seared hide.

Billie guessed that it was now about time for him to let everybody know of his presence in the vicinity. And his chum seemed to need a little help the worst kind.

"Hey! hold up there where you are!" he called out, in his high-pitched voice.

The stranger heard these words, and looked hastily up. What he saw was not a very pleasant sight, for Billie had covered him with that repeating

rifle of his, and somehow looked as determined as any one could be under similar circumstances.

"Drop that rope, mister!" added Billie, for he saw that so long as the man held the lariat tightly gripped in his hands, Don was unable to get properly on his feet.

The command was accompanied by a little significant wave of the leveled gun; and as Billie had managed to get his "fighting face" to the front just then, his appearance must have struck alarm to the heart of the unknown lariat thrower.

At any rate he did let go of the rope instantly. More than that he whirled in his tracks, and started to make off, taking high bounds as he cleared logs and brush; at the same time dodging to the right and to the left, after the manner of one who expects to hear a gun crack, and have a bullet sent singing after him.

Now Billie was such an obliging, accommodating sort of a boy that he hated to see any one disappointed; and since the man seemed to expect to be shot at, he could not find it in his heart to be stingy with his lead.

Besides, Billie really felt a curiosity to see whether the fellow could do any better stunts than he was at that time developing; and so he took aim above the fugitive's head, and blazed away, once, twice, three times. Each shot was accompanied by a wild screech that must have alarmed the man even more than the whistle of the flying lead over his head. And

the way he jumped and dodged did Billie good, for a fact.

Meanwhile Don had finally succeeded in disentangling himself from the clinging loop of the rope. He jumped over, and secured possession of his rifle, anger blazing in his eyes; but when once the weapon was clasped in his hands it was too late to make any use of it; for the runner had vanished back of a thick bunch of trees, and would undoubtedly take pains to remain hidden from that moment.

"Wow! what d'ye think of that?" cried Billie, dancing around in his excitement and glee. "I'm beginning to show myself some punkins after all, eh, Don? You just ought to have seen him jump and dodge, though; it was as good as any circus act I ever met up with. But hold on, the first thing a true hunter thinks of doing after he's shot his gun off, is to load up again; so mebbe I'd better be getting three more cartridges tucked away in my magazine. Ain't the little old Marlin a dandy, though, Don; and don't she bark lively, now?"

Don looked at his stout chum. There were traces of tears in his eyes, but they only sprang from sincere affection; because at that moment it seemed to Don he loved Billie like a brother.

"That was the smartest thing you ever did, Billie, following me, and without my knowing a thing about it," he exclaimed, as he seized the other's hand, stopping the reloading operations thereby. "If you hadn't happened along just when you did I reckon

I'd have had a heap more trouble. But come we'd better be heading up the hill again. Ten chances to one we'll meet Adrian coming flying down. Those shots, and the yells you let out, will be apt to give him a bad scare, for he'll sure he apt to think we're in a peck of trouble. But you've got me down under a pile of obligations, Billie. This wipes the slate clean of any little things I may have been able to do for you in the past."

But Billie shook his head decidedly in the negative; why, he knew that it would take him till doomsday to pay back the thousand-and-one favors Don and Adrian had been constantly showering upon his devoted head, ever since he landed in the cattle country. Still, such praise from his chum was sweet to the fat boy's ears; and his face, rosier than ever after his recent exertions, shone with a broad grin as he hastened to follow Don up the rise, trying at the same time to get the magazine of his rifle once more fully charged.

It was just as Don had surmised, for they met the third of the Broncho Rider Boys part way down the hillside, wonder and alarm written big on his face; though at sight of the two chums, apparently unharmed, he seemed to breathe easier.

CHAPTER XVI.

ADRIAN TAKES HIS TURN.

"WELL, you did give me a scare, I tell you!" was Adrian's first salutation.

"It was all Billie's fault," said Don; and then, as Adrian stared at the stout chum, he hastened to add: "but he had a good reason to yell like a Navajo Indian. I give you my word on that."

"What happened?" demanded Adrian, realizing now that there was something worth hearing back of it all.

"There was a goose stalking around down below, as sleepy as you please," Don began by saying.

"Oh!" ejaculated Billie, looking hurt.

"Never mind, Billie, I don't mean you," Don hastened to say; "for once I was silly enough, Adrian, to walk into the simplest trap you ever heard tell of. Why, when I saw my bully knife lying right there in the open I ought to have guessed on the spot that it had been dropped in such a place purposely; but what did I do but step forward, and bend down to get it."

"Yes?" said Adrian, as the other paused for breath, as he had been climbing the hill," and what happened then?"

"Some one roped me, as neat as you please," replied Don, sheepishly, as though to a cowboy that sort of thing might appear to be a cardinal sin.

"Whew!" exclaimed Adrian, his eyes opening wide, as he began to see where all the racket must come in.

"And Billie here arrived on the spot just in time to order the fellow to drop the lariat, which he did as soon as he could, and ran like all get-out. Billie liked that sort of thing, and to see him sprint the harder, he says, let out a few shot and howls. That's all, Adrian; but how lucky it was for me that Billie took that notion to follow me down."

"I should say it was," the other declared, enthusiastically, as he wrung the fat hand of the tenderfoot chum. "And he didn't wing the fellow, did he?"

"Oh! I could have done it as easy as falling off a log, if I'd wanted to," Billie hastened to avow; "but you see, I didn't want to do anything like that. So I purposely aimed over his head. But say, talk about high jinks in running, that man would have taken the prize in any match. I never saw a deer that could beat him."

"But who was he, Don?" asked Adrian.

"There you've got me," replied the other.

"You didn't know him, then, you mean?" pursued Adrian.

At that Don laughed, as though tickled.

"Why, to tell you the truth, I never had anything like a fair look at him," he admitted, frankly.

"Things were happening right quick, you see, and that rope kept me busy. Fact is, Adrian, the fellow knew how to manage, and he had dragged me down, for I caught my foot in a vine about that time."

"But Billie must have seen him fair and square," remarked the other.

"Well, I should say I did," declared the stout chum; "for how else could I cover him with my trusty rifle, and order him to throw up his arms, and anything else he had about him? But he chose to skip out. I guess he must have suddenly remembered that he had a pressing engagement about then; and I did all I could to get him to hurry up, didn't I, Don?"

"Nobody could have been kinder, Billie," answered the other.

"But tell us, then, Billie, what he looked like; did you know him?" pursued Adrian, bent on learning all the facts possible; while he looked around with rather a savage expression on his face; as though intimating by this that if he had as good a chance as Billie, he might not let the rascal off quite so easily, when he could teach him a lesson in good manners by making him limp in earnest.

"No, not that I know of," came the ready answer.

"But describe him as well as you can," continued Adrian; "perhaps one of us could recognize him that way. Some of these cowboys have their own queer style of dressing that act like a trade mark. Go on, Billie, that's a good fellow."

"Why, he was a Mexican, I should say," Billie began by declaring.

"What makes you think that?" asked Don, quickly; for up to now he had somehow been inclined to believe that this might all be a trick, played by Clement Derring and a party of the Double D. Ranch boys; because it would not be the first time they had tried to give him a sensational round-up.

"Oh! he looked that way," remarked Billie, complacently; "wore a velvet jacket, that was pretty old and greasy; had rings in his ears; and his trousers were slit at the bottom, too. Then he had on a bell-crowned hat like so many of the fellers from down south wear. And boys, I heard him say something when he saw me that sounded like that one word Mexicans always use."

"What was that, Billie?" Adrian went on, smiling now, because the other had made out such a clever case.

"*Carramba!* I never heard a Yankee cowboy say that, all the time I've been down here in the cattle country. How about that, Don; am I right?"

"You sure are, Billie; and you beat the Dutch about hitting the mark, when once you try. That was a Mexican all right; I'm as sure of it now, as if I'd glimpsed the fellow while he ran," was Don's reply, given most heartily.

"A greaser, eh?" commented Adrian, thoughtfully; "what would you make out of that now, Don?"

The other shrugged his shoulders, as he continued to walk up the hill alongside his chums.

"Cattle rustlers!" he remarked, grimly.

"Perhaps that Mardo Mendosa crowd?" suggested Billie, looking interested.

"No doubt about it," Adrian went on. "And that must have been what the queer signal light we saw last night meant. They noticed us come in, and laid a plan to surprise us, which fell down when they found only a dead camp-fire there. Then one of them picked up your knife, and believing you'd come back for it, thought to hang around, meaning to have some fun."

"Well, he had it!" Billie promptly asserted; "and ten to one he surprised himself by makin' such fast time. Gee! if you could only have seen how he jumped over all the logs in the way; it was great, that's what!"

"He certainly didn't stop to pick up his rope," Don went on to say, "which you see, Adrian, I've got looped over my arm; and a pretty hefty rope it is too, made out of horse hair, you noticed; which is another proof to me that the owner was a Mexican cowboy, because I never saw any other go to all that trouble, when he could get a good rope at any cross-roads store."

"Well, what's going to come out of this?" questioned Adrian; "do you think they'll hang around here, waiting for another chance to give us trouble; or will they take the alarm now, believing that a lot

more of our boys may be coming this way, either for a hunt, or to look them up?"

"Do you think that one has stopped running yet, Don?" queried Billie innocently; "because from the way he was going, it looked to me like he'd got into the habit, and might find it hard to quit. And if the rest of 'em saw him, mebbe they'd be seized with a panic too, and skedaddle out of here."

"Oh! I hardly think we're going to be bothered with that lot any more," Don went on to say; "though of course we'll take ordinary precautions everywhere we go, and try not to be caught napping like I was."

Billie seemed relieved.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Don," he observed; "because I was afraid you'd think we had ought to get back to the ranch in a hurry; and somehow I'd hate to cut off this glorious hunt that way, just when it looks like I was getting my hand in at last. This seems to be *my* day, you know."

"That's what it does, Billie," laughed both the others in concert.

So they arrived at the new camp. Everything was just as it had been left; and the three ponies nibbled the grass in the fresh places to which they had been moved since sun-up.

After a short time they packed up and prepared to move further into the hill country, believing that their chances for coming on more game would be better up higher. At the same time this move would take them further away from the place where they

had reason to think the lawless rustlers had had their headquarters at the time the three boys came along.

At noon they were in quite a wild section of country, and had mounted so high that there were numerous cliffs, as well as declivities around them. Billie had been so persistent in his desire to find out if there was any chance to run across a bear, that the others made up their minds to devote a fair part of their time to investigating the rough country, where such a customer would be apt to have his den, if there chanced to be a grizzly around.

But Billie was so much exhausted by the long and tedious climb that he expressed a desire to stay in camp the balance of that day.

"To-morrow I'll be as fresh as a daisy, boys," he affirmed positively; "and then I will root out a savage old grizzly while my luck holds goods. Oh! wouldn't I be just tickled to death if I could only say I'd shot such a ferocious customer? Why, Alkali told me there were lots of cow punchers who would whip up their ponies, and skip out of the country as fast as hot cakes, at the sight of a bear; but somehow I don't feel that way, not while I'm in the mood for hunting, like I seem to be right now."

And Billie did not mean to boast, either, but was saying what he thought, as both of his chums well knew.

Don found plenty to do around the new camp; but Adrian seemed restless, and finally taking his rifle along, he started out, saying that he would have a little turn, and see what there was doing.

He climbed up higher and higher, meaning to ascertain whether it was possible, with the field glasses he carried, to get a distant glimpse of the faraway Keystone Ranch buildings; for they could see these uplifts dimly on the horizon when at home.

Having finally attained a position on the top of a cliff which stood facing the quarter in which he meant to gaze, Adrian adjusted the glasses, and began to look.

He had laid his gun down near by, but did not mean to leave it; besides, nothing in the way of danger could reach him up there, he believed.

But it happens that peril sometimes lies in conditions that are not visible to even the most searching eye. Adrian, moving about a little to find a better spot from which to view the panorama stretched out before him, chanced to set his foot on a loose stone that rolled under him. And the first thing he knew he found himself going over the edge of that terrible precipice, together with a fragment of rock.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BATTLE IN THE AIR.

"Oh!"

That one word seemed to be forced from the lips of the falling boy, even as he felt himself going over the edge, along with some fragments of loose rock, and a whole lot of earth.

He threw out his hands with the involuntary movement of one who sought to seize upon some object that might save him from a terrible fall into the depths; but it happened that no friendly bush was growing there on the face of the precipice.

Adrian must have fallen as much as twenty-five feet when he landed upon a narrow shelf of rock that jutted out from the face of the height. It was not more than three or four feet in width, and had he fallen in any other way than lengthwise the boy must have simply bounded off, to continue his downward plunge some two hundred feet and more, before striking on the cruel pinnacles that reared themselves at the base.

It is astonishing what the sense of self-preservation will do for any active boy, when his life is in danger. Adrian came down with quite a hard knock, that must have jarred him severely; but like a flash his first instinct was to flatten himself out, so as

to keep from rolling off the ledge. In fact he fairly clung to the rock, as though he were glued there; and lying thus for half a minute, managed to collect his scattered senses.

Then he raised his head, and looked around him.

It was not a very pleasant view he found spread before him now, with that empty void in front, the cold cruel wall of stone behind, and that narrow shelf running only a short distance in either direction, and ending abruptly.

But Adrian was a boy of considerable nerve, and now that he had a fighting chance, he could not be dismayed by his alarming situation. True, it did not seem as if any one, no matter how nimble they might be, could climb that steep rock wall behind him; and as to clambering down the face of the remainder of the precipice he would not like to have to undertake it.

When he cautiously thrust his head beyond the edge of the shelf he grew dizzy at looking down to the base of the declivity; and the sight of those rocky fingers pointing up at him was anything but pleasant.

So Adrian sat there, thinking it all over, and trying to make up his mind just what he had better do.

He wondered whether he could make his comrades hear if he shouted to them. It happened that they were around on another side of the mountain at the time, and that might make the task more difficult.

Of course, given time, they were sure to become anxious because of his absence, and set out to follow after him; when he might make them hear his calls, and in this way bring about a rescue. But Adrian knew that hours were apt to elapse before this came about; and meanwhile how was he going to keep from getting dizzy, and falling over the edge of the shelf?

He even decided to build a little rampart of loose stones, in order to guard against such an accident. Just then something brushed swiftly past his head, and made him start.

Looking hastily up the boy discovered it was a great bird that had swooped down close by him, passing not more than twenty inches from his head.

"An eagle!" was his immediate exclamation, not without a tinge of alarm; for Adrian knew something about the habits of these kings of the feathered tribes, and the savage swoop made by this one gave him cause to fear that it might have a nest, and fledglings, somewhere close by.

Filled with a new dread he looked quickly around him. There was certainly nothing on the shelf that resembled a nest; the only object beyond scattered stones being a pretty thick billet of wood that had possibly been brought there by one of the eagles, either by accident, or in the making of their nest.

Then a movement attracted his attention to a spot just beyond the end of the friendly shelf.

"There it is, as sure as anything!" exclaimed Adrian, as he saw the mass of woven sticks, and

other things, making quite a good-sized nest, in which doubtless a couple of half-feathered eaglets lay, quaking with fear on account of the racket caused by his recent tumble over the edge of the precipice.

Hardly had he made this unpleasant discovery than he had to duck his head quickly to one side, as he saw a swiftly approaching shadow. He was only in time to avoid being struck with the talons that were thrust out toward him by the passing bird, that just then looked as big as a vulture to the alarmed lad.

Adrian realized that he was in a doubly precarious situation. He might receive a savage blow at any time that would stagger him; and cause him to fall over the edge of the narrow shelf.

Why should the eagles want to attack him in this way, when he certainly did not have the slightest intention of harming their young ones? But then, they did not know this, and his very presence was significant to their suspicious natures.

Down came one, and then the other, swooping at him with a fierceness that told of their being fully aroused. Once the boy felt a blow on his arm that gave him sudden pain, and he even feared that it had been broken, though he had to think only of hanging on to the rocks, and not allowing himself to be thrown off.

He wondered whether the furious birds would let him alone if he managed to make his way along the ledge to the further end, as far away from their

nest as he could go? All the while he was striking at them when they came darting down, and shouting also, in the hope of causing them to draw off. But instead of giving up the attack the great birds seemed to become more excited than ever.

Slowly Adrian made his way along, foot by foot. He had to pause every dozen seconds or so to fight off another assault; and it seemed to him that the birds kept getting more and more aroused with each defeat, instead of calming down.

He was already bleeding from several scratches, for he always tried to throw up an arm in order to protect his eyes from those terrible talons that were thrust out with each swoop of the eagles. Their sharp bills too came in contact with his body, so that in a number of places he knew they had torn his garments.

Adrian was fighting with all his might, because he knew that his very life hung in the balance; and that is sweet to any healthy lad. Oh! how he wished that just for five minutes he could have his repeating rifle in his grasp; he would ask for nothing better; and how gladly would he prove what sort of a marksman he was by dropping first one great bird, and then the other, as they circled above him, so close at hand.

The attacks were coming so fast now that it seemed as though he were constantly employed warding them off. At this rate it must be only a question of time when the boy would be tired out, and fall an easy victim to the feathered enemies; or else

be knocked from the narrow ledge by some blow from the powerful pinion of either of his assailants.

Adrian had picked up a wedge of rock, and with this in his clutch he sought to strike home, in the vague hope that fortune might favor him, and one of his foes be sent whirling down into space.

But they both happened to come at him together, and instead of being able to make use of the rock, he found himself beaten down, and obliged to flatten himself out on the shelf, lest he roll off, and be lost.

Even that little incident had its use, it proved, for Adrian felt something hard under his body; and with a sudden glow of newly awakened hope he pushed a trembling hand down, to have it fall upon the billet of wood he now remembered seeing there upon the ledge.

If one of the eagles had carried that fragment of a branch there at some time in the past, it must have unconsciously been in one sense digging its own grave while so doing. For as soon as the boy grasped that heavy stick in his hand, he felt that he could now in a fair degree defend himself.

His face was bleeding from a number of scratches, and he could not see as well as he would like; but dashing his sleeve hurriedly across his eyes, while the eagles were again circling, uttering savage cries as they did so, Adrian drew himself up to a sitting position.

His left hand he closed upon a projection of the

cliff, so as to keep from losing his balance when he struck, for he meant to throw his full force into that blow, because so much depended on it.

Then one of the eagles started to swoop down at him again. A novice like Billie never could have held his own at such a time; but Adrian was agile, strong, and accustomed to meeting all sorts of troubles as they flew.

Whack! came the stick, fairly and squarely meeting the oncoming bird. Adrian only for that firm grip on the rock, might have been placed in extreme peril, for he swung around as on a pivot.

But the eagle had disappeared, and he could hear its heavy body flapping down the face of the precipice, striking every projection in the way.

Thrilled and encouraged by his success, the boy made ready to repeat the happy stroke; though still hoping that the other eagle would take warning from the fate of its mate, and haul off; for Adrian did not like the thought of leaving those fledglings in the nest to die. But here was the second bird coming down at him in as furious a rush as ever, and there was nothing for it but to defend himself to the best of his ability, come what would; because it had been none of his choosing, this fight with the pair of eagles.

His first stroke failed to reach its mark, and three more times did that unreasoning bird dart down at the boy before Adrian managed to get home a blow that sent it fluttering down the face of the rock, pretty much in the same way its mate had gone be-

fore; though Adrian cherished a generous hope that the wretched bird might only be hurt, and able later on to once more ascend to its nest.

Exhausted after this desperate conflict he lay for some little time without moving, trying to get his breath, and thankful over what seemed almost like a miraculous escape from death. But it might be noticed that he still held on to that stick which had served him so well; indeed, if he ever got out of this difficulty alive, the chances were Adrian would treasure that knotty fragment of a branch as a memento of the most thrilling event in all his experience.

The air blew cool and refreshing high up there where he lay; and presently he felt in a condition to sit up and take stock of his injuries, which he was pleased to find only surface hurts, and not likely to be serious; though Adrian immediately proceeded to wash the scratches with the contents of a little phial he always carried with him, as a preventative against blood poisoning from contact with the claws or talons of any sort of bird or beast that lived upon animal food.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ANOTHER USE FOR A ROPE.

WHILE satisfied that he had acquitted himself reasonably well in his conflict with the eagles, Adrian could see no hope for leaving his perilous perch on that narrow ledge. He examined every foot of the wall above him, and concluded that he dared not risk the chances of trying to mount upward toward the summit; for should he lose his footing, and fall while on the way, who could guarantee that he would have his former good luck, and land on that friendly ledge again?

He looked long and earnestly down the side of the mountain, but could see nothing of his chums. Apparently, then, his outcries as he fought the great birds could not have reached the ears of the other boys, or they must have shown up ere now.

Once more he started to call; and then he had a shock, for chancing to put his hand back of him he discovered that instead of his holster containing his revolver having become lost during his first fall, as he had believed, it had simply swung around out of reach; and there snugly resting in its leathern case was the six-shooter such as every cowboy carries.

"Well, Don has no cause to call himself the silly

after that," declared Adrian, as he took out the gun, and looked at it grimly; "why, with that I could have knocked over those two birds as easy as winking. Oh! how did I come to miss it? I'll never get over that, for a fact. Talk about Billie being a tenderfoot, why, it looks as if some other people I know hadn't graduated from the greenhorn class yet."

But later on, when Adrian came to think it all over, he found that he was not to be so severely taken to task after all. The attack of the eagles came so quickly, and before he had had much chance to find himself, that he was really given little time to make any sort of investigation in order to ascertain the extent of his resources. And once the battle began he had to bend every energy to the one sole task of trying to keep on the shelf, and warding off the swooping birds as they came darting down at him with successive rushes.

However, the discovery that he now had a means of letting his companions know he was in need of assistance gave Adrian considerable satisfaction. Of course his pride would have to suffer in consequence, and he would have gone to all sorts of trouble could he have seen any way of getting out of the scrape without calling for help; but the same blank wall stared him in the face; and besides, he felt too weak from exhaustion now to attempt any desperate feat.

So he fired three shots in rapid succession, and then shouted again.

How slowly the minutes passed as he waited and watched below; for he felt that when the others came they would show up down there. He amused himself in trying to guess what had become of the field glasses that he had been holding when the strange accident of that treacherous stone rolling under his foot brought about the downfall. The last he remembered was giving them a toss, when he realized that he was going; and they had either fallen over the precipice, to be lost forever, or else landed above.

Ah! that was surely some one moving away down there beyond that spur where the coulie at the base of the descent began. Yes, a face was thrust out, and he recognized it as belonging to Don, who was peering cautiously around, evidently having been attracted by the reports of the pistol, and the shouts following the same.

"Ah! there!" called the boy up on the shelf; and the astonishment of his chum at discovering his plight was almost laughable.

"What're you doing up there, Ad?" he asked, naturally.

"Well, just now I'm sitting here as quiet as a mouse, waiting for somebody to fetch a rope, and lower the same to me," replied Adrian, "but a little while back I was having the hottest session ever, and came mighty near ending in taking a header down there," and he pointed over the edge of the shelf.

"Did you fall over the top, then?" continued

Don, using his hands as a speaking tube or a megaphone rather, in order to make his voice carry upwards.

"Well, it looks that way," replied the other; "but that was only one trouble I ran up against. If you were close by you'd wonder where I got all the scratches I'm sporting right now. Eagles, Chum Don, two of the biggest you ever saw; and as they've got a nest, and young ones close by here, let me tell you they made life warm for me up to the minute I happened to get hold of this stick," and he held up the cause for the great birds' downfall as he finished speaking.

"And you fought 'em off, all the while hanging to that slit of rock!" cried the astonished Don.

"You're wrong there," Adrian went on to call out; "I knocked both of them headlong down the rocks; and unless I'm away off in my guess they're at the base of this precipice right now. But Don, hurry back to camp, and get a rope. The only way I can climb out of this is to go up to where I came from. It's just a dozen or so feet above my head; but I'm too weak to climb, even if I dared tackle the risky job."

"Tell me first, are you badly hurt, Adrian?" demanded the other, alarmed.

"Oh! not so bad as to worry," replied the boy on the shelf of rock; "now, skip off, please; and when you come back, better bring Billie along, because you might have to pull me up, there's no tell-

ing. You can climb to the top around the side where you are. So-long, Don!"

With this parting salutation of the range Adrian waved to the other to get moving, and Don immediately vanished from view.

The wait after that became insufferably long.

A whole hour must have dragged by, and there was as yet no sign of a rescue. To amuse himself, and help kill time, Adrian went to work and built quite a rampart of loose stones, such as he had thought would be necessary in order to keep him from rolling off the ledge, should his stay there be so prolonged that sleep was apt to creep upon him.

Then a tiny bit of stone falling from above served to tell him that there was something doing up there. Raising his eyes he discovered the face of Don eagerly thrust into view.

"There, still, Ad?" asked the other, in a tremulous tone, which showed what a great strain he had been laboring under; with the fear always before him that his chum might have fallen from that shelf from sheer weakness.

"Yes, on deck, Don, but getting mighty uneasy. Whew! this is slow business; but I'm glad you've arrived up there. Billie along?"

"Sure!" called out a high-pitched voice; "but Don told me to keep back, because you know I might act clumsy, and not have your luck if I fell over. But I'm ready to help pull, Adrian, like a house afire, when you're ready!"

"Good for you, Billie!" answered Adrian, who

was no longer worried about his chances of rescue, for he knew that even though he had to climb the rope through his own exertions he could get there in the end.

"I picked out this spot," Don continued, "because the rock seems to be firm, and that's what you can't say of it where you went over. D'ye think you can shove along so's to get right under me, while I lower the rope to you?"

"Easiest thing ever," cheerily responded the boy on the shelf, as he started to hunch himself along.

"Be careful, Adrian!" warned the one above; "please go slower, won't you? It just makes my flesh crawl to see how little room you've got down there, and then to keep on looking until it seems as though the bottom is a mile or so away!"

"That's the way it felt to me when I was fighting for my life with those two mad eagles, let me tell you," said Adrian; "but now that I don't have to duck and dodge and strike out, this shelf looks like it might be a whole acre. But I'll be careful all right, let me tell you. I don't hanker going down there any more'n the next fellow. Keep lowering the rope a little at a time, Don. How have you got it fixed above?"

"Passed around a small tree, so that with Billie braced to hold the end, nothing is going to get away, make up your mind to that," came the reassuring reply that afforded Adrian the utmost satisfaction.

He was presently exactly under his comrade, and the dangling noose swung just above his head.

When Adrian had caught hold of it, and made sure to secure the loop under his arms, he called out that he was all ready. While he could possibly help matters more or less by finding crevices in the rocky wall, that would serve to relieve his chums from a small part of the load, still, the greater part of the work must be borne by those husky fellows above.

Well did they prove themselves equal to the task, Billie in particular showing a remarkable ability to pull with almost the strength of a horse; indeed, Don had to caution him to take things easier, lest they spill their companion before he could find a lodgment on the top.

And in this fashion, then, was Adrian helped over the edge. He was delighted to find himself once more on a firm foundation; that ledge, while a blessing to him at the time of his fall, had become rather irksome.

But grasped in his hand as he came up was the valuable ally with which he had whipped the pair of eagles—the billet of wood found on the ledge at the time of his greatest necessity.

And one of the first things Adrian did after shaking hands with each of his comrades was to pick up his rifle, and then look eagerly around.

"Hurrah! I *did* throw it back of me, didn't I?" he was heard to exclaim, as he darted forward, and snatched something from the ground.

Of course it was the pair of field glasses, and strange to say they had not suffered any serious injury through being so rudely cast aside.

They sat there for a little while, under the belief that the boy who had been through such a series of perils might want to rest before heading for camp. And it was at this time that Billie amused himself by looking through the glasses toward distant Keystone Ranch, as well as elsewhere.

Don looked the rescued one all over, to make sure that he had not received some serious injury that might have been ignored by Adrian while under such a stress of excitement; but to his satisfaction he found that there had been a fortunate escape, though the other would be marked with various scratches for some time.

Then, as they were thinking of getting up, and leaving, they heard Billie giving vent to something like disgust.

"If it ain't one thing it's sure to be another," he observed. "We crawl out of the fryingpan into the fire. First it was the cattle rustlers, and now it's Injuns!"

"Indians!" echoed Don.

"What's all that talk about, Billie?" asked Adrian.

"Sure thing," the tenderfoot went on to say, "A whole bunch of the reds just dodged into that clump of trees away down yonder, riding ponies, and waving guns!"

CHAPTER XIX.

UP A TREE.

"ARE you joshing us, Billie?" demanded Don, severely.

"What, me? As if I ever try to play such a little mean joke as that'd be!" the other sent back, indignantly. "They were Injuns, give you my word for it, ten or twelve of the beggars at that, and with gay blankets as well as feathers in their hair. Guess I ought to know an Injun when I see him through a field glass."

"Yes, they must be ferocious Indians for a fact, if they wear blankets in their hair; and especially if these were as red as your blanket is, Billie," remarked Adrian, sneeringly.

"Oh!" Billie broke out with, "I meant they had colored feathers in their hair, and hangin' down their backs; and that the blankets were wrapped around each warrior. Just when I was goin' to tell you to look, say, they disappeared behind them trees like they was sure locoed."

"He's right, Don, for I just had a peek at one of the same Indians," Adrian observed at this interesting juncture. "See, there they come out of the trees, and seem to be going along quiet like."

"Yes, I see them now; hand me the glasses Billie, and let's have a close look."

"What d'ye make of them, Don?" asked Adrian, after a minute had gone by, during which the other had been looking earnestly.

"Well, I hardly know what to think," Don answered, slowly. "They're never on the warpath, because they ain't painted that way. They seem to have guns, and act like they felt mighty good. Every now'nd then one will throw up his arms, and seem to want to shout, but we don't hear 'em give tongue any."

"But what under the sun can Indians be doing here, so far away from their reservation, tell me that, Don?" asked Adrian.

"There's where you get me, my boy," was the candid answer the other made. "I haven't the slightest idea about it. Perhaps they've had permission to go off and enjoy a little old fashioned hunt away down here. But what's more than likely to be the fact is that they've just skipped out, and left the reservation to look after itself while they run about the country, trying to believe the old times have come back once more."

"Oh! my stars!" ejaculated Billie, looking alarmed, "do you mean by that they'll start in trying to clean the whites out with gun and tomahawk and knife, like they used to do in those old times of Geronimo and his Apaches?"

The other two laughed.

"Hardly that, Billie," remarked Adrian, pres-

ently; "the up-to-date Indian knows too much about the soldiers of the Great White Father at Washington, to try and snap his fingers in the face of sure punishment. No, when they got off the reservation these days it isn't to fight, but to carouse—have a regular picnic as you might say. And I reckon that's what this bunch mean to do, when they get in the heart of the mountains where the hated paleface dog soldiers can't find them easily. But they're gone again now, and seem to be heading along the foot of the mountain range, so chances are, we'll see nothing of the lot."

"I hope not," muttered Billie, as though he could not get the old-time ideas concerning the noble but cruel red man out of his head.

They saw no more of the hunting party of Indians, and by degrees even Billie became reconciled to the idea that there was nothing in the way of trouble to be anticipated from that direction.

The trip back to the camp was easily made, since it was pretty much all downgrade. Adrian had his cuts looked after again, and beyond a certain soreness in the muscles of his arm, where the wing of an eagle had stuck him such a severe blow he declared he felt little the worse for his remarkable experience up there on the face of that cliff, as it must now be termed, when they were on a level with its base.

Billie seemed getting a bit uneasy as the afternoon wore on. He had recovered from his "tired feeling," and the thought of that anticipated bear treat kept haunting him, although he carefully re-

frained from mentioning any more about it to either of his chums, for fear lest they make fun of him.

All the same, Billie had resolved that if the chance came along he would take a little jaunt around the immediate neighborhood—of course he would not go far, and be on his constant guard lest he fall into a peck of trouble that might turn out to be even worse than Adrian's mishap.

The chance came when Don lay down on his blanket to rest, and the other chum was busy trying to write up his recent adventure, so that none of the particulars might slip his mind later on.

Unnoticed by either, Billie smuggled his beloved Marlin out of camp by holding it close against his person, when he started toward where lay the spring from which they had been getting all their drinking water since stopping here.

And as the other boys would think he had only gone for a drink, if they noticed his flitting at all, which was doubtful, Billie figured that he would have more or less time to wander around, and observe whether there were any likely spots among the piled-up rocks that gave evidence of serving as bears' dens.

Now Billie had never in all his life looked upon a bear's den, but he had read about the same, and believed he could tell what it must be like. And if he could just quietly step into the camp and tell the other fellows that he was able to lead them to where they might scare out a real live grizzly, why, Billie thought that would be just too fine for anything.

Of course he was foolish to allow himself to indulge in such ridiculous visions, when the chances were such a thing as a grizzly had never been seen down in that section of the country, in spite of the stories cowboys delighted to tell about their wonderful adventures with the great beasts.

But then that was Billie, and when he got a notion in his head it was very hard to convince him to the contrary. Just now he seemed to think the mountains must be honeycombed with caves, and every other one sheltered some sort of game in the shape of old and young bears, brown bears and black; why, Billie was not quite positive in that imaginative mind of his whether the white bear might be found also, or if only inhabited the regions of polar ice.

Billie was wise enough to take his rifle. The warnings of his chums had made an impresson that far upon his mind, in that he did not dare venture forth without being properly armed.

In trying to relieve the tenderfoot of any undue fears which might interfere with his enjoyment of the outing, perhaps Don and Adrian had gone a little too far; for with the passing of the cattle rustlers and the Indians, there seemed to be nothing to create anxiety in the entire neighborhood.

So he started to navigate around the camp, and of course got lost. That was a foregone conclusion as soon as Billie started out; and ten chances to one the boy reader in the beginning guessed what was coming.

But there was worse in store for the Southern lad. He might flounder along for a little while, and upon deciding that he was going away from the camp instead of toward it, he could recall the advice which Don had given him to be followed under similar conditions—determine to remain at a standstill, until the others had a chance to come out and find him.

It was getting rather warm work for Billie, and several times he made use of the familiar red bandanna handkerchief which he had knotted about his neck, to wipe the drops of perspiration from forehead and cheeks.

"Well, I declare, I wonder now if I've just run across some stray cattle, and we'll be able to drive home quite a bunch of the long horns," was what Billie said to himself, in ill-concealed joy, as he suddenly made a discovery.

There right before him he saw an animal "pawing the ground" with one of his front split hoofs, and uttering curious little familiar grunts; indeed, it was this sound that had attracted the attention of Billie to the spot, and led to his seeing the beast.

"Why, honest now, I do believe that's Uncle Gordon's old Whiteface, that used to be the king of the whole drove before he was whipped by a younger bull. Let's see, didn't they say he'd disappeared, then, and nobody's ever seen him to this day. And to think that I'd be the one to discover what's become of Whiteface. Hey! what's the matter with you, old boy? Glad to see me again, are you? Well,

that's a funny way you take to show it! Look at him sending the dirt up over his head, with his hoof; and now he's sticking his horns down into it, to toss some more aflying. Whew! I wonder now if he's mad about anything. I'm sure I never did a blessed thing to bother the old wretch. Guess I'd better be backing away, because I just don't like the looks of him right now. Oh! say, hold on there, keep off, can't you?"

This last exclamation was brought about by the bull suddenly charging toward Billie full tilt, with lowered head, uttering sundry snorts as he came on.

The boy actually forgot that he had such a thing as a gun, which was just as well, for he could never in the wide world have stopped the rush of that heavy animal with a bullet delivered head-on. In fact, he deliberately dropped his faithful rifle, on which he was going to depend utterly in all cases of tribulation; and turning, sought to find some haven of refuge in the shape of a tree, where he might be safe from those cruel, long and pointed horns.

The only tree near him just then, it seemed to the excited Billie, was a small sapling; but as there was no time to reflect, he made for this, and hastily drew himself up. Fortunately there were enough little branches to allow of his using them as steps, and in this way he managed to get up high enough before the arrival of the bull.

When the animal did come up it was with a shock, for he butted against the small sapling, and threat-

ened to knock it over. Billie was clinging desperately to the swaying tree, and calling out to the bull to desist.

"What d'ye want to bother me for that way, I'd like to know?" he said, just as if the angry beast could understand him. "I never done anything to you, have I? Why, so far as I know I only set eyes on you two or three times, and then it was—here, quit bobbing that tree so? First thing you know you'll upset me on to your back; and I want to tell you right here I ain't no circus rider either. Oh! what if he does keep ahackin' away at my tree till he splinters it, where'll I be, I'd like to know? And what makes him so mad at me, that's the silly thing about it?"

CHAPTER XX.

BRONCHO BILLIE'S TACTICS.

THE way that slender sapling swayed and bent under the furious efforts of the powerful head of the bull certainly alarmed Billie very much. He feared that it might take a notion to give way at any moment; and then what was going to happen to a fellow about his size would be hardly worth mentioning.

At first he thought that his talking might be the irritating cause of the bull's fierce attacks; and with a great effort he shut his teeth resolutely together, resolved not to say a single word.

"Perhaps I've been speaking about him now in a way that he don't like," was the way Billie put the matter up to himself; "he's used to human company, you see, because he was on the ranch a whole lot of years before he disappeared, with a broken heart they said; and so he must understand some of the things cowboys say. But I didn't mean to insult him, and I'll take it all back right now."

Strange to say Billie's reformation did not seem to do the least good. No matter whether he jab-

bered away as fast as his tongue could wag, or remained painfully mute, the old wretch of a bull just continued to butt at that delicate sapling, and grind his ugly horns against it, so that he had already rubbed all the bark off, and was now beginning on the inner wood; all the while uttering low grumblings that struck terror to the heart of the clinging boy.

Finally, when the endangered tree again wobbled violently, so that Billie was waved back and forth, and had to tighten his already frenzied grip, he could keep silent no longer.

"Then it ain't that he's been feeling I insulted him!" burst out the boy indignantly. "He just keeps banging away for pure ugliness, that's what. Something about me he don't like; and yet I'm sure I haven't had on my fighting face once since he first saw me. Whatever can it be, I wonder?"

In vain he racked his brain to try and understand, so that he might remedy the matter before it grew too late.

"Now, if I'd been silly enough to fire at Old Whiteface, and given him a wound, I could get on to his being mad at me, and trying to gore me with those horns of his; but I never even thought of such a thing; which ain't saying what I'd do this blessed minute, if only I had my old rifle here in my hands.

Oh! how I wish I did, now. Say, wouldn't he be some surprised when I commenced filling him up with lead. But I suppose I'll have to yell for help, which I hate to do the worst kind. It makes a feller feel so small. But then, didn't Adrian have to bang away with his pistol to make us hear; and how about my being on hand to help Don the time that rustler had him roped? Reckon they oughtn't to have the laugh on me so *very* much, if I do let out a few hollers."

The day was warm, and his exertions had made the drops of perspiration run down his face; so that Billie, as he thus communed with himself, mechanically raised the folds of his bandanna, hanging under his chin, and started to wipe his forehead and cheeks.

Suddenly he came to a full stop, and stared at the big handkerchief with distended eyes. Then he burst out into a cackling laugh.

"Well, did you ever see such a loony as Billie Winkle in all your life?" he exclaimed, exultantly. "Here all the while I've been racking my poor brains to find out what there was about me that riled the old bull; and it's been this flaming red bandanna, as sure as anything. And I ought to know that cows and bulls hate anything red the worst kind, because I was thrown over a fence by our milker once, when

I was only three years old, because I had on a red —er dress. Well, just watch how quick I make this thing disappear, will you?"

With eager fingers he untied the knot, although it seemed as though it had never been so hard to handle; but that was on account of his extreme nervousness, and the difficulty he experienced in working, when most of the time he had to keep both hands employed in holding on for dear life to the swaying sapling.

But in the end the flaming handkerchief was deposited in his pocket.

"Now, see that, how obliging I am, Whitey?" he called out to the bull. "And since there ain't any more reason for you to get your mad up, I hope you'll be kind enough to clear out, bag and baggage, and leave me alone to continue my saunter. And say, I wonder which way does the camp lie? I'm more mixed up than ever, since I've had to climb this tree, and hang on like a monkey. Hey! quit that butting, I tell you! The red flag's gone, and I'm showing a white one now. Don't you know that means surrender? I've had enough of this exercise.

To Billie's further disgust the bull seemed to pay not the least attention to the fact that he had taken

off the offending handkerchief, and thrust the same in his pocket.

"He's just got in a habit of whanging away against this poor tree now, and can't stop it, that's what," the prisoner went on to say in dismay, when the charges were continued with no slackening of vigor.

So Billie tried to cudgel his brains, and think of some clever way by means of which he could outwit the animal. He yearned to be able to get his hands on his repeating rifle again. Oh! how happy he would be, could that be managed in some way, he cared not how.

"I'm getting real mad about this business, too, let me tell you," he went on to say, quite loud, so the bull could plainly hear him. "I c'n just feel my fighting face comin' fast now, and then you'd better look out, Old Whitey. Once you get me real worked up, and you'll be sorry you bothered with a feller of my size. Wow! he near knocked me out of this that time; and he's buttin' harder than ever. What in the wide world can a feller do? Wish I could think up something."

If he could only manage to distract the attention of the beast for a little while, so that he might drop down, and hurrying over to where his gun lay in plain sight, get possession of it, Billie felt that he

would be in a position to show himself off as a bull fighter. But so long as he had to hang there in that tree, like a ripe persimmon shaken by the wintry wind, he was worse than helpless.

Ah! what about the red bandanna?

The bull seemed to have shown a particular hatred for that; and if he threw the detested thing down, would not the beast have his entire attention taken up with trying to thrust his horns through the same, at the same time jumping on it, so that he must forget such an individual as Billie existed?

Joy! It seemed well worth trying; and with eager, trembling fingers the imprisoned boy hurriedly snatched the offending fabric out of his pocket.

But then he paused, as he remembered that this was the last die, and if it failed he would have nothing left in reserve but to lift his voice and yell; for Billie did not carry a small gun on his person like his cowboy chums were in the habit of doing.

He must somehow manage to cast it in a direction *away* from the place where his precious rifle lay; and just as far as possible too. He found that the wind was blowing favorably for the experiment; and with his heart in his throat, as he afterwards confessed, when telling of his adventure, Billie be-

gan to wave the red bandanna so that the bull below must surely take notice.

Then, when he saw that the beast was actually looking upward at him, and the moment seemed just as favorable as he could wish, Billie gave the handkerchief a quick toss.

It floated out upon the breeze, and was carried a short distance away, offering a mark that the bull could not fail to observe.

And when Billie saw that the animal was actually turning to chase after the offensive rag, he started to trembling anew with eagerness, under the belief that his dearest wish was about to be realized, and he might now scramble down from his painful perch.

Without waiting to see anything more, the boy began to stir. He had been clinging so tightly to the sapling that it seemed as though he had taken root there, and it was only with a most determined effort that he broke away.

Well, it certainly required a whole lot of nerve to begin descending, with that ferocious beast snorting so close by, as he thrust his horns at the red bandanna, now lying on the ground, and carrying on in a furious way; but then Billie knew of nothing else he could do, and he did want to get his hands on his reliable Marlin again, so that he could wind up the career of the old runaway hermit bull.

The animal was so engaged with the hated red rag that apparently he had no eyes for anything else just then. So Billie just let himself slip down the sapling until his feet touched solid ground.

Oh! what a delicious thrill passed over him when he could feel that he had the earth under him again. But he knew that he must not linger a second, for the bull might get over his antics with that plaything, which he was tossing up in the air, and then goring savagely whenever he found it spread out on the ground.

Billie started in the direction of the spot where his rifle lay. He dared not try to run, for fear lest such a move attract the attention of the bull toward him, and so he tried to *sneak*. Perhaps either of his companions would have greatly enjoyed the spectacle of the fat boy attempting such a maneuvre, for his ideas along those lines were almost comical; and as he moved gently forward it looked as though he had been given a job of walking on eggs.

He had to keep a jealous eye on the bull part of the time, too, for if the furious beast started in his direction again, Billie was bound to change his tactics for something a great deal more energetic.

Now half of the distance had been covered, and the boy's heart even began to throb with anticipated triumph; though he knew he must not think that he

had won out until he actually felt the gun in his possession. But then that was no reason he should not contemplate paying Old Whiteface back in his own coin with more or less satisfaction.

Two-thirds of the distance covered, and the bull still seemed to be venting his vindictiveness upon the unoffending bandanna, which was by now being reduced to a rag.

Billie reached his gun, and had just stooped to pick it up, when to his alarm he heard the thud of hoofs beating on the ground; and looked up to see his old enemy, the bull, charging him again, the torn bandanna flaunting triumphantly from one of his black horns.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TABLES TURNED.

The sight was enough to frighten even a more seasoned hunter than Billie. After all his smart work he had not dreamed that his red bandanna would be brought back to him in this fashion by the white-faced bull.

But at any rate Billie did not seem to be so badly scared that he could not move hand or foot; and that was promising. He had just secured possession of his gun when the unpleasant discovery was made that his four-footed enemy had once more turned his attention from the red rag to the late owner; and was coming toward him on the gallop.

The distance separating them was so very short that before a few seconds could pass the huge beast must be upon him.

Billie forgot all about the fact that he was usually reckoned a stout and clumsy boy. Just then, with the spur of fear to urge him on, he felt that he was

equal to sprinting with the best runners that had represented his high school in the annual field games, with rival seats of learning.

He straightened up, and went plunging away, hardly knowing what direction he was taking in his extreme haste to give the charging bull the slip.

That was where his luck held good. Had he happened to have turned back toward the little sapling in which he had lately been perched, he never could have made it in safety before the arrival of his pursuer. And even if by an extra spurt he succeeded in reaching the small tree, to climb the same before those black horns prodded him would have been utterly out of the question.

Now, it chanced that in this other direction where Billie headed there were a goodly number of large rocks lying around loose. In such a country this was no uncommon occurrence, for they were to be found almost everywhere.

Billie noticed them as soon as he got straightened out, and a wild hope sprang up in his heart that in some way he might make use of these obstructions in order to baffle the evil intentions of that determined pursuer.

How he managed to reach the outermost of these detached rocks Billie could never himself have told, had he been asked; he simply shut his teeth hard

together, and made himself believe he could fly like a bird.

When he passed around that sentinel rock the bull was so close behind him that poor Billie fancied he could feel the hot breath of the angry animal on his neck.

Perhaps that sort of imagination caused him to "let out another kink" as Billie himself would have expressed it; and in this manner did he manage to slip past the outlying rock.

But this did not mean that he was safe, by any means, for the bull was still in full pursuit, and apparently bent on keeping it up to the bitter end.

Then began the most ridiculous game of "hide-and-seek" that Billie had ever taken part in. The worst of it was that the bull seemed to enjoy the game greatly, for dodging in and out among the rocks, he would make sudden furious rushes at the boy, and come so close to striking him that Billie was in an almost constant quake, because he saw those polished black horns waving before his eyes everywhere he fled.

Again and again he just escaped being struck by an inch as it seemed, ducking back only in time to evade the blow.

Now he was being chased again, just as he had seen a poor rabbit pursued by an eager beagle hound

in his Eastern home. It was fast getting more than a joke with Billie. And he informed the bull plainly, once he had a chance to get his breath, that he was heartily tired of the whole performance.

This was when he had squeezed himself into a narrow opening between two of the largest rocks, and the bull was prevented from following after him by the fact that his horns could not accommodate themselves to the small space; indeed, it was a tight squeeze for such a stout fellow as Billie, and he could only turn around with difficulty.

He heard the rattle of those cruel horns on the rock, as his four-footed enemy tried to follow him into the crevice; and his heart seemed to be in his throat with sudden alarm; but there was no need, and hope once more began to play tag with his fears.

His first thought was with regard to his gun, for so excited had he been while all this hunt was in progress that he hardly knew whether he still clutched the weapon in his hand or not.

Looking down, he was immensely tickled to find that he still gripped the rifle. And the consciousness that he was now in a position to pay off old scores made Billie laugh hysterically.

"Oh! the tables have turned at last, and I'm going to have my inning!" he called out, as well as he

could, considering the fact that he was panting for breath at the time.

The animal rattled his horns once more against the rock, and even turned his head sideways, as though seeking to thrust in at the cowering figure just beyond reach.

"You can't do it, and there's no use of you trying, Whitey!" cried Billie, derisively, when he had anxiously watched this operation for a minute, and his courage once more returned in full force. "I've found a bully old fort and shelter; and if you only knew what was good for you, you'd own up beat right now, hand me back my red bandanna, and clear out. But chances are ten to one you don't know, and that you'll hang around here till I get my fightin' face workin' again; when I warn you something will happen that you won't like either, because it ain't goin' to agree with you."

For answer the bull clanged his horns some more on the rock, chipping off quite a good-sized slice, where it happened to be crumbly.

"Oh! look at him tryin' to dig his way in to me, would you?" exclaimed the astonished boy; "say, that's going a little too far, let me tell you. Think I'll stand here, and put up with such nonsense? Well, I reckon not much. For the last time I'm going to give you a solemn warning Old Whitey, to

skip out. You won't do it, eh? Is that what you mean by shaking your old horns at me, and sniffing that way? Well, I just hate to do it, but I'll die of hunger if I'm kept locked up in this hole till you cool off, and meander away. So if it's got to be done, the sooner the job's over, the better for all of us. Are you ready to take your ticket, Whitey; because I'm going to check you right through?"

Billie was now fully determined that he would be justified in shooting the hermit bull that had deserted all his mates on the ranch, and taken to the hills, after being defeated in a battle royal with a younger and more sturdy leader.

"You're no good to Uncle Gordon, anyhow," he went on to say, as he pushed the barrel of his Marlin forward slowly, and proceeded to take deliberate aim; "and if a feller *has* to take care of himself, he's got a right to use whatever weapon comes to hand. You've got your horns, and I'm gripping my gun. It's been a fair test, old chap, and Billie Winkle's going to win out. Besides, I want that bandanna; it's torn pretty bad, but I need it in my business. Now, look out for yourself, because the conductor is coming around to punch your ticket for a long trip."

Then Billie took several aims before he could bring himself to pressing the trigger of his rifle.

The detonation was fearful in that confined space; and for a short time Billie could not tell what his success had been, although ready to declare that he had not " flinched " the least bit, when it came to the point of firing.

All he could hear was a confused trampling outside his " fort," accompanied by much snorting, and heavy breathing. Then came a shock, as though some heavy object had dropped down on the ground.

" Oh! I do believe that he's keeled over! " exclaimed the excited boy, as gun in hand, and ready to send in another shot, he began to wriggle along toward the exit of his narrow prison.

It certainly took him several times as long to push out of the cleft as he had taken to insert his body there, " and I don't believe I growed any, either," Billie was saying to himself, as he scraped the skin off in several places, while painfully carrying out this part of the programme.

Finally however he managed to burst out of his cell, rather the worse for his tight fit; but then there was joy in the discovery that his late bulky adversary was lying there on the ground, apparently beyond all possibility of doing him further harm.

Still, Billie had heard that some of these old bulls were inclined to be " foxey," and he approached the stiffening form with considerable apprehension,

ready to beat a quick retreat, should he discover any inclination on the part of Whiteface to get upon his feet again.

But in another minute he had his foot triumphantly planted on his late enemy, and was waving his hat as he let out several cheers.

Since he realized that he was lost, Billie determined not to roam all over the country trying to find the camp. Better let his chums come to him, he thought, very wisely; besides, he wanted to see their looks of astonishment when they discovered what he had shot, and heard his wild story right on the spot where the wonderful happenings had taken place.

There Don found him half an hour later, for Billie had answered his calls from time to time, and thus guided the cowboy chum to the spot. He had not even removed the torn red bandanna from the left horn of the dead bull, because he believed that while it remained there it must be looked upon as mute evidence as to the truth of his story.

And before Billie would consent to accompanying the other back to camp he had to relate the whole event, showing Don just how the bull had charged him, where he perched so long in the sapling; the marks on the bruised tree; the red bandanna still clinging to the left horn of the dead bull; his snug

retreat among the rocks; and last but far from least the hole where his bullet had found lodgment in the side of the animal.

To all of this Don listened with great interest.

"You're sure a wonder, Billie!" he declared, at least seven times, while the illustrated account was being told; at which Billie's face would be illuminated by a satisfied smile; for flattery was sweet to him, as it is to every boy.

As there was no use trying to eat any of the tough meat, they finally abandoned the carcass of the deposed leader of the Keystone herds.

"The wolves will have a feast to-night," remarked Don, as they strode away.

It was just when they were about to enter the camp that Don came to a sudden pause, and Billie heard him utter an exclamation that seemed to indicate both surprise and annoyance.

"Oh! what is it now, Don?" demanded the tenderfoot, starting to finger the lock of his rifle; as though he fancied that some second edition of the bull species might be about to dispute their passage.

CHAPTER XXII.

SMOKE SIGNALS.

"Look over yonder, Billie!" remarked Don, as he pointed upwards.

"I don't see anything queer; unless you mean that big hawk sailing along high up, with a fish in his talons," observed the other, as though puzzled to account for this display of feeling on the part of his comrade.

"To the right of the hawk—don't you see something trailing straight up like a dark columu against the sky?" continued the other.

"Oh! now I do, Don!" declared Billie, suddenly arousing; "and it looks like the smoke from a fire, too; but what kind of wood would they make it out of that sends up that black smoke? Why, I may be a greenhorn, but anyhow I've learned enough not to do that."

"But you see there may be times when the fellow who makes the smoke *wants* it to be seen," Don went on to say, quietly, still watching.

"Eh! Do you mean that he uses it as a signal; is that it, Don?"

"If you watch closer, Billie, you'll find that there are really two trails of smoke creeping up, though they sometimes merge into one. And whoever it's intended for, it must stand for something or other. Now, if it happened to be three smokes, and they saw it away over at the ranch, as they might, you'd find some of the boys coming pell-mell this way before another daybreak; because I made that arrangement with dad before leaving. If we got into trouble, the smoke signal was to tell him we needed help."

"Well, now, that was clever of you, Don. I must say," declared Billie. "But who d'ye think is makin' all that smudge up there?"

"That's hard to say," replied the other; "and as we're so close to camp, let's go on in and see what Adrian thinks."

They found their companion 'tending camp, and on the alert. When Billie did not come back, and later on they caught the faint sound of what they believed to be his rifle, Don had determined to set out in that direction, and see if he could find the missing tenderfoot. A code of signals had been arranged between them, so that if absolutely necessary they could communicate while separated.

As considerable time had elapsed and the absent chums failed to show up, Adrian had been growing more and more anxious. He believed he had caught the faint sound of shouting away off in the quarter where Don was heading when last seen; but it did not exactly seem to be any call for help; and so he had thought best to stay where he was for the present. Should Don need him he would send out the call for aid as agreed on.

Of course the stay-at-home was pleased when he heard some one approaching, and on turning around, gun in hand, discovered both his chums coming into camp.

"Look up yonder, Adrian; what d'ye make of it?" asked Billie, quickly, wishing to make it appear as though he were deeply interested in the matter, which, in fact, was the truth.

"Hello! smoke signals, eh? And a pair of 'em at that! Looks like somebody up yonder wanted to let others know of a discovery he had made. Perhaps it's about us, Don?" the new discoverer remarked, a bit seriously, Billie thought.

"Cowboys, do you think, looking for lost cattle here in the mountains?" Billie asked, as they all stood there, and watched the rising pillars of smoke.

"Not much chance of that," replied Adrian. "See, there, they've thrown a blanket over the fire

now, and the smoke comes to a sudden stop; only to rise again after ten seconds in a bigger cloud than ever. That's the way they talk. I've seen hunters carry on a regular conversation with smoke."

"And I've watched Indians do the same thing," Don went on to say.

"Indians!" repeated Billie, quickly, as his eyes sought the face of the speaker in sudden anxiety; "say, now, you don't think they could have turned back to look for us, do you, Don?"

"You mean that bunch we saw riding past, don't you, Billie?" the other went on to say. "Honest now, I couldn't tell. If I had to give my opinion on the matter I'd be more apt to believe that the cattle rustlers haven't skipped out of this section of the country yet."

"Then they must have been laying around, watching to see if we had a lot of the boys along with us; and now this feller up in the mountain is tellin' his partners that it ain't so. Wonder if they'll make another try at us to-night? Huh! seems to me this hunt ain't goin' to pan out just as full of fun as we thought it would," and Billie scratched his head while making this remark, as though he felt grievously disappointed over something.

"I don't see where you've got any grouch com-

ing in, Billie, after that brilliant affair with the bull," said Don.

"Bull!" echoed Adrian; "what's all this talk mean? Where did Billie run across a bull; and do you mean an elk or what? Speak up, and let's hear, won't you? Why, I notice now that he *does* look kind of dilapidated; and his clothes are torn too, in a number of places. What's happened?"

"Reckon you'd be feeling some sore too, if you had to hang up in a little tree almost by your eyebrows, while a ragin', rearin' bull was butting at the bark just below your toes, and swingin' you this way and that like fun," remarked Billie.

"That's right," added Don, encouragingly, for he liked to see Adrian look puzzled, "and then chasing him all around among a lot of loose stones, till finally Billie, he dodged into a narrow crevice, and stuck there, just where the bull couldn't get in at him, because his horns were too wide."

"O! see here, please tell me what it all means, and don't tease me this way!" pleaded the other; whereupon Billie burst ont triumphantly:

"Well, we know where Old Whiteface is now, don't we, Don?"

"Whiteface!" echoed Adrian; "you mean that big dun bull that used to lead the herd, but that disappeared in a night, after some of the boys told us

about his being licked in a royal battle with a younger fellow? And was he the bull you're talking about? Well, you do give me a shock, let me tell you. And so you know just where he's to be found, you say?"

"Don't we, Don?" demanded Billie, grinning broadly. "And I fired only one shot out of my Marlin too."

"Is that so, Don; did he knock Old Whiteface over?" asked the other, incredulously; for up to now Adrian had not seen reason to believe the stout boy showed any signs of being a hunter.

So Don told the story briefly, and at it's conclusion Adrian congratulated the bull-fighter on the successful outcome of his adventure.

"And it's done you a heap of good, too, Billie," he went on to say encouragingly, with a sly wink in the direction of Don; "why, I can see a big difference in your shape already. That hot little spin must have just melted off pounds. Great stunt, Billie. If you only had the luck to meet up with just such a bull every other day or so, chances are you'd soon be able to get a job in a museum as the living skeleton, wouldn't he, Don?"

"Excuse me," Billie hastened to say, drily; "I'd rather go just as I am, even if fat boys don't command the big wages skeletons get. But see here, the

two smoke columns have gone, and don't seem liable to come back again. Does that mean the talk fest is over?"

"That's about the size of it," replied Don.

"Well, there's one thing sure," spoke up Billie, with a shake of his head as if his mind was made up; "you don't ketch me wanderin' around here all by my lonely again in a hurry. No use talkin' fellers, I ain't to be depended on when it comes to locations. Once I get rattled, and I can't for the life of me tell where north is; and even if I did find that out, how am I to know whether the old camp lies, east, west or south? While we're up here I'm just goin' to stick home, unless one of the rest of you takes a notion to invite me to go for a walk."

And while the others did not say so, for fear of hurting Billie's pride, from the suggestive motions exchanged between them, it was plain to be seen that they quite agreed with him that this would be the best course.

"I wonder," remarked Don, later on, as they were making preparations for cooking supper, "whether they did see those smokes at the ranch house; and if dad could get it through his head that I made them?"

"Well, that'd mean we'd see some of the boys around here by morning, wouldn't it?" Adrian ven-

tured to say. "Too bad if they had all that long, dusty gallop for nothing. That's the trouble of smoke signals, unless you arrange a regular code, and make use of a smothering blanket to send up puffs that stand for words. But if the boys come, perhaps they'll stay with us a bit."

"Yes," remarked Billie, who had not forgotten his ambitious projects; "and mebbe Corney or Alkali might know where to locate a bear for me. You see, while my hand's in I ought to get busy, and knock one of that kind over. Only for that I'd be satisfied to go back home to-morrow."

"Yes, somehow the hunt seems to have had its edge taken off, by all these things happening around us," admitted Adrian; "what with cattle rustlers who hate everything connected with Keystone Ranch; Indians off their reservation, and perhaps looking for trouble; runaway bulls getting mad because our chum chooses to wear a red handkerchief knotted around his neck, as all cow punchers do—why, it isn't as pleasant as it might be."

"How about to-night, boys?" inquired Billie, whom the recent adventure had caused to puff up considerably, and feel that he ought to be considered whenever plans were being discussed: "we'll sure have to be extra careful; and does that mean we ought to change our camp again, Don?"

"Wouldn't be a bad idea, I think; don't you, Ad?"

Adrian said he was of the same mind, so that it was thus agreed upon. And while they discussed the evening meal, the boys were somehow conscious of a queer feeling that made them glance around from time to time into the gathering shadows, as though they imagined they were being watched by unseen eyes.

Not a pleasant sensation, to be sure; and Billie declared that he felt rather "creepy" over it; he would not budge from the place he occupied; and all the while it might be noticed that he sat there with his trusty gun very close to his chubby right hand; just as though he had made up his mind that no matter what happened he was not going to be caught napping.

But the time passed slowly along, and finally Billie began yawning, which was his way of announcing that he felt sleepy enough to turn in. Then Don remarked that they had better put the stuff on the backs of the horses, tethered close by, and find a new camp site some distance away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BAD LOOKOUT.

"THIS looks like a good place," and as he spoke Don came to a stop, so that the other boys caught up with him.

Adrian looked around, and then ventured to give his opinion.

"Just what we want, with trees to hide us, and some sweet grass for the horses close by. See, they're making as if they want to begin nibbling right now. Just as you say, Don; we'll call quits, and snuggle down. Billie here is so dead tired he couldn't walk much further."

Instead of getting offended at this plain language the fat boy chuckled.

"That's what I am, for a fact," he admitted candidly; "but then, just stop and think what I went through with when that old bull was rampagin' after me. I had the time of my life, sure I did, without any foolin'. Say we bunk here, and it's me to find a soft place, where there won't be any roots to nag me in the ribs."

This part of the programme was easily carried out. Don took Billie's pony and staked him out where he could feed; while the other fixed his red blanket, and prepared to settle himself for the night.

"If you want me to take my turn on guard, why, just give me a nudge, fellers, and I'll get busy," were the closing words from Billie, as he wrapped himself up like a mummy, and rolled over, using his saddle-bag for a pillow.

But really Billie knew that he need not bother himself about waking up until the sun peeped in at them; his chums did not feel confidence in his ability to remain awake, and fulfill the duties of a sentry; and rather than trust to a weak support they would divide the night into two watches, taking turn about.

Time passed on.

Adrian had taken the first watch, and was sitting there at his post, trying to keep awake; for his eyelids seemed weighted down with leaden scales, so that finally he had to jump to his feet, and pace up and down, in order to ward off the slumber that would make him a prisoner, against his will.

He could hear the ponies cropping away at the grass. Once or twice he fancied that one of them acted a little suspiciously, for he caught a snort occasionally; but on listening to ascertain whether it

were worth while investigating, or perhaps arousing the others, Adrian concluded on each occasion that it meant nothing.

After walking about for a short time, he came to a stand again, and stood there looking up at the bright stars, as seen between the branches of the trees overhead thinking perhaps of bygone scenes, and the possibilities of his having to start toward the north before long, because he did not feel that his affairs were being properly conducted by the uncle who was in charge at the Montana ranch.

Then all at once, without more warning than would have come had lightning shot out of a clear sky, something happened.

Adrian heard a slight rustling behind him. He thought it might be made by some prowling 'coon, or possibly a rodent of the woods, or even a red squirrel that was seeking food at night time.

Just as he started to turn, with the idea of looking to see, he was pounced upon by a flying figure, and hurled to the ground. As he fell, Adrian, mindful of his charge, let out a wild screech of warning. He struggled as best he might; but the unknown foe had his knee upon the boy's chest, and was evidently of a mind to use his clenched fist whenever Adrian in his writhing gave evidence of slipping loose.

Both Don and Billie sat up instantly, when that

whoop rang out. They scented danger, and instinctively reached out their hands for their guns, placed so conveniently near at the time they rolled up in their blankets.

A chill of fear shot through them when, despite all their fumbling, they failed to discover any sign of the weapons; which had evidently been silently removed before the attack was made on the sentry.

Don still had his revolver, and was getting it out of the holster, rather clumsily perhaps, because hardly more than half awake himself, when a crushing weight bore down upon him, flattening him to the ground on his back.

Evidently Billie had been just as badly treated, if one could judge from the snorting and grumbling and spluttering that arose from a point close to Don's elbow, followed by an outcry:

"Let loose there, you! 'Tain't fair to jump a feller in the dark this way, and not even give him a chance to see what's what. Oh! my stars, I grabbed a feather then! Injuns! boys, the reds have got us!"

Don was by that time suspecting the same thing, for he too had felt certain things to tell such a story. It was not a pleasant outlook for the Broncho Rider Boys. Held thus on the ground they could feel their captors fastening thongs around their wrists behind

them. Then a dragging sound was heard, and a heavy object landed close to where Don and Billie lay helpless, puffing with their recent exertions.

"Ad, is that you?" said Don, suspecting the truth.

At first there was no reply. The fact of the matter was, Adrian felt so utterly ashamed that such a thing had come to pass while he was on guard, that he had little heart to say anything. But Don was not to be denied, and again went on;

"Are you hurt bad, Adrian; because you act so queer? Oh! I hope they haven't pounded you black and blue, or knocked you on the head, because you fought back?"

At that, knowing how anxious his chum must be feeling concerning him, Adrian could not keep silent any longer.

"Yes, it's me, all right, Don," he grumbled, "but feeling mighty tough because this thing happened to us. I was wide-awake too, and had just taken a little walk up and down, to stretch my legs. I never dreamed anybody could creep in on us this way, while I was on guard. After this I'm going to hide my head under a blanket when anybody mentions acting as sentry. I'm a greeny, all right."

"Well, how about that smart pony of mine, Ad?" demanded Don, who seemed to be about as

puzzled as his chum over the wonderful way in which these unknown enemies had crept in upon them; "he's been educated to wake me up if anybody came creeping around, or the wolves got too sassy, either. But he never gave the alarm. And what do you think, they managed to sneak our guns away before jumping on you."

"What's that?" gasped the other, amazed at the cunning shown by the night prowlers; "got your gun and Billie's too? Well, we are a lot of simples, as sure as anything, and ought to be tied to the ranch till our pin feathers grow. But Don, are they the Indians, do you think?"

"Didn't you hear me say I grabbed a feather out of the head of the feller that was holdin' me down; and don't that make 'em warriors?" asked Billie, just then, he having managed to recover some of his lost breath about that time.

"Yes, and listen to what they're saying now?" Don went on to remark, for several deep-throated voices were jabbering away, in a lingo that might just as well have been Greek to Billie, for all he could make out of it.

"Is that Apache talk, Don?" whispered Adrian, presently.

"Yes, but I don't seem to get on to it as well as I thought I could," replied the ranch boy, in a

puzzled tone. "Perhaps these reds belong to a different tribe than the ones I've been up against; they seem to speak queer, and run an English word in now and then. Reckon they must have had a heap to do with white people up on their old reservation."

"But can you get on to the drift of their talk at all?" demanded Adrian, who felt a great curiosity to know what the Indians meant by attacking them in this way; and if it was only for the purpose of robbing the white boys of whatever of value they chanced to possess in the way of food, fire-arms and such things as would appeal to the heart of a son of the desert and plain.

"Well, one of them is ordering another to start a fire, and you can hear them hustling around for wood," answered Don, promptly.

"I'm glad of that," said Billie, "because then we can see what the heathen look like. I want to know who's took my Marlin, too, understand, because I'll be called on to identify him in court some fine day."

"Court!" jeered Adrian, "listen to that talk, will you, Don? Why, out here you've got to catch your man before you haul him up, either before a justice, or to a telegraph pole. And these slippery reds have a way of disappearing, like the fog when

the sun peeps out in the morning. What else are they jabbering about now, Don? Can you make anything out of it all?"

"I think they're talking about what they can do with us, and it don't sound nice, either," replied the ranch boy; unwilling to go into further particulars because of hurting Billie's feelings. "And they mentioned a lot of names like Two Sticks, Red Crow, Young-Brave-Afraid-of-His-Shadow, and Hanky Panky. I reckon those must be some of their names, though I never heard of an Indian called by that last. He must be a half-breed."

"Oh! you needn't be afraid to blurt out the whole thing," spoke up Billie, right then and there; "I know what Injuns are like, and what they do to fellers they capture. Will we have to run the gantlet, or be burned at the stake first, Don? I want to know so I can show 'em a true Stonewall Jackson Winkle may be as brave as any painted warrior that ever lived."

"Never mind what they're talking about, Billie," remarked Don; "but I want to say that you're sure proving yourself a mighty good pard in such a trying hour as this, ain't he Ad?"

"There goes the fire starting up; and now to see what they look like," remarked Adrian; and the

whole three of them began stretching their necks as best they were able, in order to catch the first glimpse of the unknown parties who had come into their camp like shadows, and made a clean sweep.

As the flames caught the dry wood, and sprang up higher, they were able to see the figures bending over. And the first glimpse told them the story; for there were the dirty blankets, the feathers in the hair, the brown faces, decorated in some instances with daubs of colored paints, so as to give them a really hideous appearance.

Billie felt his blood run cold at sight of these things. All that he had ever read or heard about the cruel doings of the untutored savage seemed to come into his mind just then, like a flash, utterly overwhelming the poor fellow. Still, he was determined not to appear weak, or cowardly; and he bit his lower lip until he must have made the blood come, in the effort to regain his vanishing nerve.

"There seems to be nearly a round dozen of the rascals," remarked Adrian, after twisting his head around for some time; "and as that bunch we saw contained about the same, I reckon they knew we were up here, and came back for us. But what made you give that little jerking cry just now, Don?"

"Something struck me," replied the other, "and

it came with such a jump that I had to give tongue."

"Ain't you goin' to take us in on it, Don?" demanded Billie, eagerly; though of course he could not have the slightest suspicion of what Don meant, nor did the third chum, for that matter.

"Of course I am," observed Don, in a mysterious voice; "and now, listen!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE INDIAN DANCE.

"Go on, please," urged Billie, evidently quivering with suspense, just as if he might be entertaining a sudden wild hope that Don had discovered the presence of the Keystone Ranch boys in the vicinity, and was about to divulge the glad tidings to his comrades.

"I've been watching one of the Indians for some time now," began Don, "and all at once it struck me that he had a queer way of throwing his head back every little while, that seemed mighty familiar to me."

"But if these reds have been away up on the reservation," remarked Adrian, "how could you have run against them before?"

"There's a fellow closer home who has that way of throwing his head back," said Don, positively, in a thrilling whisper; "and his name is Clement Derring!"

"Oh!" gasped Billie; and even Adrian, who had steeled himself to hear something strange, could not

wholly repress the little cry that came bubbling up to his lips.

"Yes," Don went on; "and after guessing that much, I began to look around some more; and would you believe it, I believe I can pick out Si Slocum, who has a queer little limp, on account of getting his left leg twisted under when he was thrown a few years ago; Dave Coots, who's got a high-pitched voice like a girl's; yes, and there's that great big waddling brave with the three feathers in his hair; he makes me think of Bud Sawyer, who used to work for dad a year ago, and was sent away for taking things that didn't belong to him!"

"Don, you're right, I honestly believe you've gone and struck the truth!" Adrian exclaimed, half under his breath.

"I know I am," the other went on to say, in a determined fashion.

"But my goodness gracious!" remarked the bewildered Billie, "what would make them go and rig out like Injuns, and take us prisoners the way they have? Tell me that, somebody, won't you?"

"If Clement is here you ought to be able to guess the reason why," observed Adrian, simply. "Hasn't he always tried to get the better of Don for years, and has there been a single thing too mean for him to try, so as to have the laugh on the boy he hates

so much? Think it over, Billie, and you'll get the answer."

"I have, I do see it," replied the other, quickly; "but how would they know we meant to come up here on this hunting trip?"

"Oh! we didn't try to keep it a secret," Don went on to say. "Every cow puncher at Keystone knew all about it; and perhaps when that Dave Coots was over the other day, he picked up the news to carry home. Then Clement would see a chance to have what he calls some fun with us; and if Colonel Derring is away, as I've heard, he wouldn't have a hard time coaxing some of the wild punchers over there to join him in carrying out his scheme. They just got themselves up like Indians, and—you know the rest."

"But surely they wouldn't go so far as to burn us at the stake, would they?" asked Billie, at the same time drawing a long breath of relief.

"I hardly think they'd be willing to play red that far," Don added; "but if the boss's boy wanted to have some fun giving us a coat of tar and feathers; or making us strip, and run the gantlet, while they cut us with willow whips, chances are not a single man would object."

"Whee! but this is tough!" grumbled Billie. "You'll just have to tell me what they're doing,

because I can't stretch my neck any more. It ain't the rubber kind, you see."

"Well, they're gathering around the fire right now," went on Adrian; "all but a couple who have taken our guns and seem to be standing guard. They keep on pointing this way, and making circles around their heads."

"Does that mean they want to scalp us?" burst out the horrified Billie.

"It's only a part of their scheme to give us the scare of our lives, I reckon," Adrian went on to say. "And one thing sure, we'll make a big mistake if we let on that we've tumbled to their game. No matter what happens we must make out as if we believed them to be real Indians, eh, Don?"

"Yes, because if they believe that way, they're more apt to let us off in the end than if they think we've recognized the lot. But listen to what they're saying, would you? Of course it's all done for effect, you know; but we must just pretend to be shivering like we had the chills."

Even Billie was that curious he managed to prop himself against one of his companions, and in this way was enabled to see.

The half-score of seeming Apaches had gathered around the fire, as if to have a council talk. Billie could see that they were dressed the part

with more or less skill, each puncher having tried to outdo his fellows in making up for a fierce looking brave.

All wore leggings and moccasins, having doffed their cowboy chaps and other customary attire for the occasion. They had colored their faces and hands, and even daubed paint on recklessly, so that several looked as though they might take the prize for ugliness.

And so they began to jabber furiously, every one seeming to want to express his separate opinion. Much that was said seemed to be a sort of gibberish, for only a few of the older men could speak the Indian tongue; but the others made up for their lack of words in all sorts of expressive gestures.

One big fellow, the man whom Don had said he believed to be Bud Sawyer, and who had once worked on Keystone Ranch, jumped to his feet, and in broken English, which he doubtless thought very expressive, made all sorts of threats against the three prisoners.

"Six Tails no say wait till sun-up burn paleface boys at stake!" he concluded, in a furious roar; "do same now, take scalps first. Much mad at paleface; shoot um brudder Six Tails just 'cause him take pony. Ugh! no wait, do now!"

Then he waved his hatchet at the spot where the

prisoners lay, and sat down. The others in the circle grunted several times, and another brave got on his feet.

"Red Crow say wait. Better let white dogs gnaw bone some more. They die many times 'fore sun-up. Six Tails him set torch to wood. That all."

And so one by one they got up to deliver themselves of some opinion The majority seemed to be in favor of holding the captives until morning, before starting to put them to the torture.

Once, when this began to be apparent, the furious Six Tails, as if smarting over his wrongs, and unable to control his impatience, sprang to his feet, and started in the direction of the boys, brandishing his hatchet above his head; but some of the others clutched him by the ankles and tripped him up, whereupon he apparently consented to be good, and abide by the decision of the majority.

Of course none of the prisoners, with the possible exception of Billie, took any of this seriously. They understood that the cowboys from the Double D. Ranch were out on a big lark, and acting under the directions of their employer's son, who would doubtless agree to stand for any damages, meant to have the time of their lives intimidating their prisoners. Perhaps when morning came they would

show a great pretense of carrying out their proposed method of burning them at the stake; and in the end make out to be frightened off by the possible coming of hostile riders; leaving the trio to saw their bonds asunder, and rest under the belief that they had had the narrowest escape of their lives from falling victims to the savage instincts of half-drunken Indians, wandering afar from their reservation. And in some secret spot the band would doff their masquerade costumes, and once more appear in their true colors.

But as it had been agreed between them that they were to look on the others as genuine Apaches, and that under such conditions it would be only right they should seem alarmed and nervous, Don and Adrian assumed a frightened appearance that was far from being a true index to the state of their feelings.

As for Billie, he was that confused it was hardly necessary for him to go to any lengths in order to appear with what, Adrian called a bad case of "rattles."

Presently, when all sorts of oratory had been indulged in, some of it real Apache tongue, the council seemed to break up, all of the Indians springing to their feet, and beginning to join in a weird dance.

They imitated the real article very well, springing on their toes, with their knees bent under them, and giving little jumps as they circled around the blazing fire. Each "warrior" also let out occasional short yelps that, when heard in concert, had a decidedly thrilling effect. Billie felt his flesh creep as he harkened. To him it was all real now, despite what he had heard his chums say with regard to these painted dancers being only make-believe Indians. And he half expected to see them so overcome by their excitement that, unable to control themselves, they would come dancing over to where the helpless boys lay, and begin feeling of their hair.

Perhaps Don guessed how matters were going with his cousin from the East; for he turned, and bade him cheer up.

"It's all a silly piece of acting, Billie, I give you my word for it," he went on to say, impressively; "and if you knew Indians as well as we do, you'd see through the game too. Why, they carry on like they thought we wore blinders, and couldn't trust to our eyes. I'm only bothered for fear you give it away that we've guessed who they are. If that happened I don't know what they'd do, to try and keep us from telling my dad. Look as scared as you want, Billie, the worse the better, you know,

but inside just laugh, like we're doing, at their crazy antics."

Well, that must have encouraged Billie some; anyhow, he told Don that he was all right, and not worrying very much. After that he was able to watch the dance of the painted group with a new sense of understanding; yes, he could even detect how some of them were overdoing it in the endeavor to impress the boys with their importance as bold, bad warriors, who were ready to commit any sort of deed through which they might show Uncle Sam's soldiers that they snapped their fingers at them.

It was really a sight that none of the three Broncho Rider Boys would ever be apt to forget, at any rate, with those ten weird figures prancing around that fire waving knives and hatchets, uttering all sorts of queer noises and finally joining in a crooning song that one of those who spoke Apache started.

This was kept up until all the so-called warriors seemed to be weary, when one by one they dropped out of the circle, and threw themselves upon the ground.

Then and only then did Adrian, and his two chums, allow themselves to roll over. They no longer had the slightest doubt with regard to the

identity of these painted runaway Indians who had crept up, and made them prisoners so cleverly; and it remained to be seen whether they could manage to effect their escape during the night; or would be compelled to remain there in this uncomfortable position until morning, when the masqueraders would show their hands still further.

CHAPTER XXV.

COMRADES TRUE.

"HOWEVER am I going to sleep, I don't see," grumbled Billie, after some time had passed, and their captors gave no evidence of meaning to bother further with them until morning.

"Why, what's to hinder, if only you can forget your troubles long enough?" demanded Adrian.

"You see," began the fat boy, with a sigh, "I nearly always sleep flat on my back."

"Yes," interrupted Don, "and pretty often you let us know it, too."

"Perhaps I do snore, just a little bit," admitted Billie, reluctantly; "but with my hands tied behind me, how d'ye suppose I'm ever going to roll on my back, so as to get started sleeping? Can't do it no way; and I've either got to try some new stunt, or else stay plumb awake the rest of the blessed night."

"Well, if you do that, you won't be any worse off than we are," observed Adrian; "because neither of us expect to get a wink."

"Why not," demanded the other, incredulously; for he could not imagine any one keeping awake when they had even half a chance to go to sleep.

"Somebody must keep their wits about them in a case of this kind, so as to get up some scheme," Adrian went on to say.

"What's that? Do you really mean that you hope to make a get-away some time during the night?" and Billie began to show a decided interest, as he went on to say: "Now, I hope you ain't thinkin' of deserting a faithful chum, and leaving him to the tender mercies of this ugly looking lot. They'd take it all out on me; and while I'd stand a heap for the sake of you two, it might be more'n I could stagger under."

"Billie, don't think that of us," said Don, reproachfully. "If one gets away, the whole three must do the same. I'd scorn to slip off, knowing that you'd been left behind to shoulder my share of the trouble; and I feel dead sure Adrian here is of the same mind. Besides, it's my funeral, not yours, you know."

"How d'ye make that out, Don?" asked Billie.

"Only because Clement hates me particularly," came the answer. "Of course both of you are included in his silly old scheme, just because you happen to be chummy with me right now. But it's Don Mackay he's always figuring on how he can trip up; and so, feeling that I've pulled you both into danger, I'd sooner cut off my good right hand than run away."

"But if you find a chance, and there isn't any way you can see to cut me out at the same time, don't let it slip on that account, Don," urged

Adrian; "because, you know, once you're at liberty, you can send for help. Besides, I rather reckon that if only one of us gets away, these cow-puncher Indians will get a case of rattles right quick. They'll imagine they hear the yells of the Keystone boys close by; and say, if Si Ketcham and his bunch ever did come in on them, to find how they'd puttered with paint and feathers and greasy blankets and moccasins and all the things real Indians would carry, believe me there'd be a high old time around here."

Just the mere thought seemed to give the prisoners a warm feeling in the region of their hearts. In imagination perhaps they could see how the riders of the home ranch would assail the masquerading punchers from the Double D., and lay their stinging quirts arcoss their shoulders.

"I say, Don!" spoke up Billie about this time.

"Well, what is it?" replied the other.

"Suppose you roll over again, and get where I could reach you with my teeth," suggested the fat boy, pleasantly, almost eagerly.

"What for?" questioned Don; "I never knew you were a cannibal, Billie; and why pick me out to be a victim?"

"Oh! what's the use making fun of me, Don; when you know I only want to chew at your bonds, just like the little mouse set the lion free."

"You a little mouse, eh?" chuckled Adrian, who somehow seemed to feel the situation less keenly than either of his chums, perhaps because

he was naturally of a light-hearted disposition, and disposed to see the silver lining of every dark cloud.

"Oh! quit poking fun at me, Adrian," Billie continued; "but what do you think of my idea, Don? I've got *awful* sharp teeth; and chances are I'd be able to gnaw through that old piece of deerskin in half an hour or so, if they leave me alone."

"It isn't a bad idea, Billie, and while you're chewing at my bonds, perhaps I might get a whack at Adrian's. Then if he could only reach around so as to be in biting distance of your hands, why, it would work beautifully, every fellow be doing his level best to get the next one loose."

Adrian laughed, as though the idea rather tickled him; Billie did not know what to think. He rather imagined Don was poking fun at him; but it was too serious a matter, according to the way Billie looked at it, to take offense, and so he pretended not to notice.

"Suppose you swing around, and let me have a try, anyhow, Don," he urged, coaxingly, as though it might be the most delightful thing he knew of to chew at the tough thong of buckskin, with which their captors had bound the hands of each one of the Broncho Rider Boys behind them.

"But if you do, be careful about how you manage," warned Adrian; "because I can see that big brave looking this way; and he keeps fingering his hatchet, just as if he wanted to make us believe he intends to take a sneak over here, some time

when the rest were sound asleep, and avenge his poor brother, who was shot while stealing ponies."

So Billie, after craning his fat neck in order to get his bearings, began to edge himself over toward Don's rear; and on the part of that individual, there was an almost imperceptible movement on his part to back up.

Adrian continued to act the part of mentor, and from time to time warned Billie to repress some of his exuberance, which was carrying him along at a lively rate hardly in line with caution.

Doubtless it was somewhat difficult for those who had started to play Apache to keep up their parts. They were seen to get their heads close together from time to time, and something like a laugh would be heard, which was however speedily repressed; when for a minute or so they would once again overdo the part of reckless braves taking chances with meeting any of Uncle Sam's troopers while off their reservation.

Presently Don knew that Billie had gotten down to work, for he could feel something busy with his bonds. Once he came near crying out, as the sharp teeth of the other actually met in the skin of his hand.

"Oh! excuse me, Don, I didn't mean to do that!" whispered the other, doubtless aware of what an error of judgment he had made through the start given by the victim; "I'll be more careful after this."

"How's it coming on, Billie?" whispered Adrian,

who had, as he had promised, kept on the watch for signs of interruption, while Billie worked his teeth for all they were worth.

"I'm getting there with both feet; I mean with my best incisors," came Billie's cheery reply. "Just you lie still, and let me keep right along, Don. It ain't the nicest kind of chawing I know about, for this deerskin is old, and mouldy; but then I'm not trying to make a meal, you see; and anything that you have to make sacrifices to get, you appreciate more'n what you just pick up on the street."

"Hear! hear!" whispered Adrian, who was close enough to catch what passed between the other two, and seemed to enjoy hearing Billie talk especially; "Now, ain't our Billie just getting to be a regular old philosopher, though? But I'm glad to hear you're coming on so fine, sure I am. Keep some of your sharpness on your teeth to work at my hands, after you get through with Don. Then if we see the chance one of us'll commence to gnaw you loose in the same way. One good turn deserves another, you know, Billie. Chaw away for dear life; and we'll have the laugh on our friend Clement yet, see if we don't."

And Billie worked his strong jaws more furiously than ever when thus urged on by such a smart fellow as Adrian, who had had lots of experience.

Already some of the make-believe Indians had thrown themselves down by the fire, and were, so far as could be seen, trying to get some sleep. Don and Adrian could not but pay particular attention

to a number of little things that betrayed the fact that these fellows, one and all, were pretty much accustomed to roughing it on the range; for even in thus getting ready for sleep they betrayed this—though Billie would never have known it.

"I say, Don," whispered Adrian, when Billie had been busily engaged for quite some time, and was no longer giving frequent bulletins concerning his promising progress, from which it might be assumed that he was meeting with certain obstacles that rather took the heart out of him, though he kept stubbornly chewing away, as if for very life.

"Yes, what is it now?" queried the ranch boy, in about the same cautious voice.

"Have you noticed that small Indian, the fellow with the hawk's wing fastened to his back hair? He keeps looking this way on the sly, ever so many times. I'm wondering whether he too mightn't have had a brother, or a cousin, or a daddy strung up to a telegraph pole by the whites, on account of horse stealing; or, something like that. Reckon he don't love us any too much, from the way he shakes his head every time he peeks this way. And given half a chance I do believe he'd take one of those quick fliers this way, and introduce us to the point of his knife. See how he keeps fingering the same as it sticks in his belt."

"I've been noticing him some myself," replied Don," and for the life of me I just can't tell whether he's mad enough to take a bite out of my ear; or wants to let us know we've got a friend at court,

There, now he walks away, and seems to be going beyond the range of the firelight. P'raps he knows we're talking about him, and is too modest to hang around under fire."

"You may be right, Don," the other went on to say, somewhat uneasily; "but never yet have I run across a bashful Indian. If he thinks anything about it at all, the chances are he's figuring how he can get close up on us in quiet, so he might do something he's got in his mind."

"Oh! my! but why *can't* I get through this old stuff?" groaned Billie, who had been compelled to stop for a dozen seconds in order to rest his weary jaws; for it had turned out to be much more arduous labor than he suspected might be the case in the start.

Ten minutes later and Adrian, lying there, felt some tiny object strike his back; and suspecting what caused it, he managed to cautiously raise his head, and look around toward the rear, seeing something that gave him a decided thrill.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BETTER THAN A SNAKE BITE.

"OH! now I'm in deeper than ever!" groaned Billie, just then.

"What's the matter?" asked Don, who seemed to recognize a vein of genuine alarm in this exclamation of his cousin, lying close up against him.

"I reckon I'm a goner," the other whimpered, and Don could feel him shiver.

"Tell me what ails you, Billie," demanded Don, as sternly as any one who had to speak in a whisper could talk.

"I'm snake bit, that's what!" grunted Billie, disconsolately.

"Oh! you must be mistaken about that," Don went on to say, believing that the other was so worked up as to be imagining things.

"But I tell you I just felt it hit me on the leg," urged Billie, "a quick sharp little blow, just like I've heard a rattler always gives. Did you hear any sound like a pepperbox, or a locust singin', Don? Oh! this is piling on the agony, let me tell you."

Adrian, of course, heard all this, even as he was taking that little observation; and with what knowl-

edge he already had, it was not very hard for him to understand what ailed Billie.

Had he not felt that same smart little tap when some small missile came in contact with his body? Of course he had not, like poor Billie, been thrilled with the terrible suspicion that it came from the fangs of a venomous snake.

Why, to be sure, Billie happened to be in the way of another fragment of rock, thrown with the object of attracting their attention toward a certain quarter—that was all.

But meanwhile Billie was suffering all the torments that may come to any one laboring under the belief that his stay on this earth is limited.

"Won't you tell me, Don, how the poison begins to get to work, when you've gone and been snake-bit?" he went on to say, rather pathetically. "You've been around a heap, and must have seen some poor chap that got stung. And I wonder now if it would do any good to sing out, and let them fellers know. Would they have any snake-bite medicine, do you think, Don?"

At that Adrian chuckled so loud that the one in trouble must have heard him, for he immediately turned his attention toward that quarter.

"Needn't laugh, Ad; mebbe it'll be your turn next," he went on to say, sadly; "and when you feel the electric shock you'll be sorry you made fun of me."

"Oh! as to that," replied Adrian, "I've felt it

already, but instead of giving me a grand scare, it's made me sit up and take notice, that's all."

"On hearing this Billie changed his tune; for if his chum could feel so light-hearted about it, surely he must be mistaken, and it could not have been a deadly snake at all.

"Then what was it hit me, Adrian; please up and tell if you know?" he went on to say, in a beseeching tone.

"I reckon it was only a little piece of rock, Billie," came the answer.

"But where could that sort of thing come from; when we ain't lying under any kind of shelf that overhangs; tell me that?" asked the other.

"It was tossed over here, just like the one that hit me," Adrian went on to say.

"Then you mean some one wanted to hit us," Billie pursued; "well, that's too small and mean for anything. Next thing I suppose it'll be a stone as big as my head that'll punch me in the back."

"Ad, do you mean that some one wants to attract our attention that way?" asked Don, much more capable of grasping the facts than Billie, with his befogged mind.

"Yes, and if you can twist your head around right now, Don, you'll glimpse him; but both of you go mighty slow, or you'll have the whole bunch watching us. I can see he don't want to be noticed. There, over by that stunted cedar tree; he's kind of keeping in the shadow, so he can make motions to

us, without being watched by any of the others around the fire there."

"It's the shortest Indian of the lot," muttered Don, after he had managed to squirm around, so as to command some sort of view of the cedar in question.

"Yes, and the same one we said was looking at us queer-like, a little while back," Adrian went on to say, convincingly.

"There he goes again, trying to talk to us with his fingers," added Don.

"Oh! why didn't I learn the deaf and dumb language when I had the chanct last year?" groaned Billie, who, not meaning to be left out in the cold when there was anything worth while going on, had slewed his fat form around, so that he too could observe, without dislocating his neck. "A feller came to our place that knew all about it, and some of the boys picked it up. What a fool I was, because you see, I could easy get on to what he's atryin' to tell us right now."

"What do you make it out, Don?" asked Adrian, paying no attention to this wail from Billie; because no mill is ever run with the water that is past; and lost opportunities can avail no one.

"It looks like he's trying to make us understand something," replied the other, slowly, as he watched the short Indian. "But it's hard to understand. There, he's pointing to us now, and then back to himself. Then he throws his two hands up, as if

to say that he wouldn't hurt a hair of our heads for anything."

"Yes," Adrian went on to add, "and look at him now, would you; seems to be taking a drink, or something like that, for he's got both his hands up to his mouth."

"He must be crazy, that's what I say," declared Billie; "why, just look at the silly, working his fingers as fast as he can make 'em go, just like he was playin' a flute."

At that Don gave a little ejaculation, and there must have been something about it to tell Adrian his chum had seen a great light, since he instantly asked:

"You've hit something, Don; tell us what."

"Oh! I think I've struck it!" declared the other. "Notice what he's doing; and haven't you seen me go through the same movements when I was playing my horn?"

"Horn!" echoed Billie, in utter dismay; "but why should that feller want us to know he's just wild about music? Sure we ain't caring a cent whether he plays or not. And what's it all got to do with us; tell me that, Don?"

"A whole lot," replied the other; "don't you see what it means, Adrian?"

"I'm beginning to smell a rat," came the quick response; for it did not take near so long for anything to pass through his bright mind, as Billie required.

"It's come back home to me, and some of you laughed at me for giving that old bugle of mine to Felix, when he'd really hooked the same," said Don, with a tremor in his voice, that must have come from the joy of knowing that the bread he had cast upon the waters, never caring whether it would come back to him, now seemed likely to return, after many days.

"Felix—oh! I see now what you mean, Don!" Billie exclaimed; "he's with this wild bunch of make-believe Injuns, ain't he; and he's sorry to see you tied up like a pig meant for market? P'raps he's meaning to do something for us; mebbe he'll put the lot to sleep with some drug, the way the story always goes on, and help us to skip out, bag and baggage. But I'm right glad that wasn't a snake-bite, because I'd hate to never go back home again."

"Yes, you're right, Don," Adrian went on to say, presently; "he makes that movement again, with his fingers, like he might be playing the keys of a bugle; then he stops, and nods at you. Reckon if it is Felix, he wants to know if you've recognized him. Perhaps you'd better let him understand some way that it's all right, Don. Can't you manage to wag your head, and make him easy?"

"Wait till I change my position a little, and I'll do that same," replied Don; who was now more or less thrilled with the prospect of a rescue; at least it was worth while to know that, desperate as their condition might seem, still they had a friend in the

enemy's camp, who might find a chance to do something for them, sooner or later.

When the short Indian saw that he was understood he made a few more suggestive gestures, and then slipped out of sight.

"He's gone away!" declared Billie, with a shade of regret in his voice; just as though he had been wildly hoping the new friend would show his hand without any further loss of time.

"Well, he couldn't do anything more now," Don went on to say, knowing how Billie must feel in his bitter disappointment. "Some time later in the night, when there's a good chance, we'll hear more from Felix; but it may not be till near morning, for he'll want to wait till they're all dead asleep before he starts in."

"But he will try and get us out of this bad scrape, won't he, Don?" asked Billie, with the almost despairing air of one who is clinging to a frail raft in mid-ocean, and looking longingly toward a ship that has appeared far away on the billowy horizon.

"I reckon we can count on that, eh, Ad?" Don breathed, softly; for just then his mind was filled with many things; and chief among them was the pleasant conviction that it surely paid to do a kind act.

"Yes, looks like Felix has been doing some thinking, and wants to let you know he's of a mind to pay you what he owes you. I take it all back, what I said about him being a fellow who would never

understand what you did for him. Felix has seen a light; you set him going along new lines, Don; and I'm glad of it now. Perhaps a fellow of my size might pick up a little information in that way too. After this, believe me, I'm not going to make fun of anybody that puts out a hand to help some one in trouble, even if it is a loafer, as Felix has always been."

"But if we have to wait till nearly daylight before he gets a chance to set us loose, that's going to be a terribly long time," observed Billie.

"Not if you can drop off, and get a good nap or so," added Adrian, who knew well enough Billie would never keep awake an hour at a stretch, when his usual time for sleep came around.

"No matter," went on Don, with a sigh of relief, for things were at least looking brighter, we can't hurry it along, you know. And now everybody turn over, so we can watch what they are doing by the fire. Might as well make yourselves as comfy as you can, because it may be a long wait."

"Anyhow," Billie was heard to mutter, as he managed to roll over on his other side, "I'm glad enough that wasn't a snake bit me."

"So are we all, Billie," chuckled Adrian; "because we couldn't spare you to begin with; and it ain't the pleasantest thing going to know that you're bound to swell up with a rattler's virus. Now, just lie there, Billie, and take it all in, because the time may come when we'll want to be sure of our footing, when we start out to make our getaway from this same camp!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DEBT REPAID.

"LISTEN to your pony talking, Don!" Adrian remarked, a short time later.

"He seems to be excited over something or other," confessed the owner of Wireless, when he heard the little neighs, and caught the stamping of hoofs.

"What a pity he didn't do that a while back, and let us know these sneakers were crawling in to surprise us," continued the other, regretfully; "it would have saved a heap of trouble. But what d'ye suppose ails the cayuse now, Don?"

"I think I know," came the reply, presently. "I heard an answering neigh down the trail that leads to the level country; and chances are, some of the lot must be bringing the hosses up here. There it goes again, you see."

"Yes, and I can see moving figures now," added Adrian; "which proves you're right. They're fetching the ponies along. Wonder, now, if they've gone so far as to leave their saddles at home, when they started out on this tack? Indians never use such a thing, that I ever heard tell of."

When presently the mounts of the crowd came in sight it was discovered that the prank-loving

cowboys from the Double D. Ranch had been smart enough to look out for these little things; not a pony had a saddle on its back, only a girth which was to be of use in mounting when the animal was in motion.

"They believed in going the whole thing, seems like," Adrian observed, when this fact became apparent.

"Yes, and when we looked at them through the glasses did we tumble to their game, fellers?" ventured Billie; "not any, if I remember right. We did say they acted some queer, like Injuns who'd been meeting up with a bootlegger, and got their supply of strong drink; but that was all. Oh! they carried out their little game to the limit. And they keep it up now, like they just enjoyed it. Well, p'raps it's goin' to be the old story over again."

"What's that, Billie?" asked Don, who was pleased to see the other taking matters easily, at last.

"Why, about the feller laughin' loudest that laughs last, you know," replied the stout boy, chuckling; "and when they wake up in the early morning to find us missing, say, won't there be some tall jumpin' around here then? I'd give a heap just to see it."

The ponies were staked out in a grassy plot, and then the camp sank back to the previous condition of calm. Some of the painted riders had not even waked up, and a companion had to look after their mounts; for it was now after midnight.

This last fact was brought to the attention of Don and Adrian by their comrade, who suddenly demanded if either of them knew how the night was going, for he had been trying to figure how long they must wait until the rescue hour came.

Both of Billie's chums, like all boys raised on the plains, were good readers of the skies, and seldom found any need for such a thing as a watch. They kept track of the stars, and also the moon, when there chanced to be any, and could easily tell, on glancing up toward the heavens, what time it was.

"Oh! about twelve, or a little after," remarked Don, carelessly.

"Yes, because that star is just setting over behind that ridge, and I figured it would go down at midnight," added Adrian; showing how closely together they had settled this little matter in their observing minds.

"And it don't get daylight till near six," sighed Billie.

After that, however, they heard no more from him; so that Don guessed sleep must have overpowered Billie, and allowed him to forget all about the difficulties that loomed up along his horizon.

And pretty soon both of the others had also allowed themselves to drop off. The situation was not so black but that they could see gleams of light beyond; and youth is ever hopeful, where old age might despair.

Adrian woke up several times, possibly an hour

apart. He had a faculty of doing this, and it may have come from being placed in a position where it was necessary to get up several times during a bitter cold night, and replenish the camp-fire; for the boy had done considerable hunting away up in the snow-covered mountains of Montana, where the ranch left him by his father, lay.

On these occasions Adrian would raise his head, and glance around him. The last time he looked he noticed that the fire was almost out, and no one seemed to care enough to place a single stick upon the smouldering ashes; for the night was far from being cold.

And then came a time when Adrian awoke with a thrill. Something had surely touched him; and it was not a movement from either of his chums, of that he felt convinced.

Had the time arrived, and was Felix on hand, ready to do his best for them, in order to prove that he did not entirely lack the common attribute of gratitude?

Adrian heard a low sound like the chirp of a cricket, tuning up.

He proceeded to answer by a like chirp.

"Awake, are you?" came in a whisper, as though some one were crouching close to his side; and at the same time he felt the movement of hands that groped all over his person, evidently searching for his bonds, in order to sever the same.

"Yes; that's the place; but be careful not to cut

my wrists, Felix!" Adrian continued to say in the lowest possible tone.

"'Sh! be still!"

Then Adrian felt his hands fall free from the cruel thongs that had bound them together. Quickly following this, the same sensation at his ankles announced that the friendly knife of Felix had been busily employed there also.

Adrian was quivering all over with the consciousness that he now had the use of his limbs, though they might feel more or less benumbed for a time.

He caught a slight shuffling sound, and knew that the rescuer was working over one of his companions. As the even breathing of Billie still continued, he guessed that it must be Don. Perhaps Felix might object to trying to include such a blunderer as Billie in his scheme of rescue; but then Don would utterly refuse to avail himself of the promised freedom unless both comrades were to be with him.

But it seemed that wise Felix meant that Don himself should arouse Billie, since he would best know how to go about it, so as to avoid any outcry. It was really dangerous to lay a hand suddenly on such a sensitive fellow as Billie; he might imagine that another poisonous snake was crawling all over him, and let out a screech that would bring every so-called warrior on his feet.

Don, however, knew how to go about it, and presently he had communicated to Billie the pleasing

intelligence that the hour of their deliverance had come at last, if only he could control himself, and glide along with them on hands and knees.

Of course Billie was only too willing to make the venture. And he believed that he had been learning a whole lot of late, so that they must not think he would go rolling along like a barrel, cracking twigs, and creating enough noise to awaken the hardest sleeper.

When Adrian, waiting for the last of the trio to be released, took a quick observation, he found that the fire was just about out now; but it was not dark, and at first he wondered whether Felix could have overslept, and that dawn was close at hand. Then he remembered that the moon was almost at the end of its monthly journey, and arose about two hours before daybreak; why, of course, it must be up some time now, even if hidden behind the trees to the east of the camp.

Adrian looked further.

He could not exactly see the figures stretched around, under the blankets they had brought with them to further the deception that they were real Apaches off their reservation, and bent on having a high old time once more; but every now and then there would come a snore, or the deep breathing of a tired man, far gone in sleep.

But now Billie had apparently been set free. He was whispering to himself, and no doubt saying how perfectly delightful it was to once again feel that he could put a hand up to scratch his nose

when it tickled—this was an old habit with the fat boy, and it must have been very irritating for him to be deprived of one of his favorite pleasures.

There was a movement close by, as though Don might be creeping off, following some whispered instructions from the rescuer; Felix, once he managed to tell them apart was clinging to Don, as though he felt that he owed the rancher's son the debt he was now repaying at such risk to himself; for if ever those wild spirits from the Double D. Ranch learned who was responsible for the escape of their prisoners, they were liable to make it unhealthy for him, even though he happened to be the foreman's boy.

Adrian pushed Billie on ahead of him. He was too well aware of the other's ability to make blunders to allow him to bring up the rear. Billie needed urging sometimes, to get him along; for great bodies move slowly.

However, they managed to glide away from the near vicinity of the dead fire without any disturbance; for the disguised jokers slept on; and there did not seem to be any vidette posted.

Once free from the camp the shadowy figure that led the way paused, and thrust into their hands their rifles, which had been taken away from them at the time of their capture. Evidently Felix meant to do the thing wholly while about it; and he must have taken infinite pains to discover where these weapons had been placed, so he could gather them up.

Why, even Billie was thrilled to find his prized Marlin gun in his clutch, even if Felix had emptied the magazine, in order that none of his friends might be injured, should trouble arise.

Three minutes later and they stood by their horses, which had their saddles in place. Why, it was as though the wand of a wizard had been waved over the situation; so cleverly had Felix managed, actuated as he had been by that desire to repay the kindness Don had shown him when caught stealing the bugle—a scene that must have been burned on his mind as with fire, and which often recurred to the bad boy of the Double D. Ranch, causing him to have new thoughts and resolutions.

"Now, get in the saddle, and move down hill as carefully as you kin," whispered Felix, as he reached the three bronchos tethered there.

Don groped in the half darkness until he found the hand of the boy who had done all this; and he squeezed it with all his might.

"Felix, I'll never forget this, believe me!" he whispered earnestly.

"Ye'd better," came the low reply, "'case if the boys ever knows I had a hand in lettin' ye go, they'd nigh skin me. So-long, and good luck!"

Felix vanished from their sight, probably creeping back, to lie down, and pretend to be sound asleep, if any disturbance arose.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE CHASE OF THE BRONCHO RIDER BOYS.

Don's heart was seemingly in his throat with anxiety while Billie was getting up in his saddle; because, as a rule the fat boy gave out more or less gruntings when he had to lift himself in that way.

But then Billie had been fully aroused to the necessity of silence, it seemed; at any rate he managed to clamber into his seat without any more noise than was occasioned by the grinding of the leather under his weight; a complaining, creaking sound, which luckily was so like the murmur of the wind through the branches of the pinions and the stunted cedars, that it might hardly have been noticed, had any of the sleepers chanced to awaken about then.

"Ready?" whispered Don, as he tried to figure out just where they would strike the down trail, for it meant much to them that they come upon the best path leading toward the plain.

A whisper from each of the other announced that there was now nothing to delay them further; and so Don led off.

In single file the three Broncho Rider Boys began to descend the side of the mountain, just as the

ponies of the others had been led up earlier in the night. One of these uttered a shrill neigh, possibly scenting the departure of the other animals, and Don was in mortal fear lest an answering call be sent back by Wireless, Ten Spot, or Maudie; but luckily this did not happen.

And pretty soon they had reached a place where they could get some advantage of the moon's light; which made things easier for them.

The further they left the camp of the painted cowboys behind the better pleased all of them were. True, they had lost some of their possessions, but nothing that could not be easily replaced with money; and no matter what it cost, Adrian was ready to stand for the bill, feeling that he was well repaid in having outwitted the schemes of Clement Derring.

"Whew! this is hard work!" whispered Billie, who was holding up his pony, lest the animal stumble over some obstacle, and go down on her knees.

"But a whole lot better than lying there like mummies, let me tell you," advised Adrian, warmly.

"Sure. I admit that, Ad. But don't forget that I've got a bigger load to keep afoot than either of you fellers. How long d'ye think we'll have to go on like this?"

"Not a great while," answered Don; "we took another way to come up, but those fellows have been here before, and know the ropes. I can see the plain down there right now; and how good

it'll be to reach it. Mountains may be all fine enough to hunt bears and tiger-cats in, but give me the level every time. I know where I'm at down on the plain, and up here——"

However, Don did not finish his sentence, for just then there broke out on the night air a series of loud and angry shouts. They came from above, and could mean but one thing; the pretended Apaches had discovered the loss of the prisoners!

In their fury at having been so nicely hoodwinked they even neglected to play the parts they were supposed to fill; for the boys could catch quite a few pretty strong words uttered in plain cowboy English.

They could be heard jumping about at an excited rate, and both Don and Adrian understood that a quick pursuit would be inaugurated, with that agility that distinguishes everything plainsmen do.

"Ride hard!" exclaimed Adrian; "no use poking along any more, for they'll guess we must have started down the mountain, and you'll hear them plunging after us in less than no time. Watch your pony, Billie, and keep an eye out for logs and rocks in the way. We're off!"

The bronchos seemed nothing loth. It was as though they sniffed the sweet odor of the lower lands, which meant home to them. Perhaps they shared in Don's love for the flower-strewn plain, where the sweet grasses grew in season, and the turf was soft and pliable underfoot.

It was a wild scramble, now, that the three lads

entered upon. In broad daylight it might have been bad enough, but how much worse when they had only that deceptive moon, now far gone in its last quarter, to aid them?

Don was pretty sure about his mount, because Wireless was one of those nimble-footed beasts that seem able to discover obstacles through some subtle sense, as of smell, and avoid them with ease. Yes, and Ten Spot was built upon something of the same order; but as for Maudie, Billie had selected her mostly on account of her sturdy build, for an ordinary pony would have soon given out trying to carry such a load mile after mile.

Already they could plainly hear signs that told of a hot pursuit on the part of those from whom they had so recently escaped. Loud shouts, mingled with wild neighs from the equally excited ponies, gave full warning that the entire bunch must have started down the front of the mountain; and no doubt they were coming with the reckless speed that usually characterizes the work of the average cow puncher, who can never do anything, however simple, without an accompaniment of whoops, at the same time slapping his mount with bridle or quirt.

Several times Adrian, who brought up the rear, had a thrill, as he fancied he saw Billie's pony take a stumble; for he expected to find that the rider had been hurled from his saddle like a stone from a rubber catapult in the hands of a boy.

But Billie, who had never been a really poor rider for one of his size, seemed bent on proving himself

a wonder on this occasion. He not only kept his seat, but also helped his pony hold up, when any of these little stumbles came along. After that Adrian was going to take off his hat to Billie; who was really surmounting difficulties that neither he nor Don knew anything about.

But the tension was terrible, and Adrian for one would be glad, away down to his toes, when the rough mountain was left behind, and they could find themselves upon the level country again.

He wondered whether they were losing ground, because he knew how recklessly the wild riders in the rear would urge their horses on.

By this time they must have glimpsed the fugitives, or at any rate have heard the sounds of their ponies crashing through shrubbery as they went down the decline; so that it was not a blind chase after all.

Nearer and nearer they drew to the bottom of the mountain. Neither Don nor Adrian had ever dreamed, when they urged their mounts up that slope that they would descend at such headlong speed as this; and with Billie along in the bargain—that was the one astonishing feature of the whole business, that Billie made the downward plunge without breaking his neck, or having his pony seriously stumble.

And now they had arrived at the foot.

Behind them they could hear their pursuers coming, pell-mell, with all sorts of whoops and cries. Some still kept up the play, and tried to imitate

Indians in their shouts; but others had apparently given up the idea of any further masquerading, for they uttered plain, unvarnished United States language to indicate their disgust and anger at having been so nicely tricked, by a trio of mere lads at that.

"Hurrah!" cried Billie, when he found his pony stretching over ground that no longer sloped downward at an angle of thirty degrees, so that he had a constant feeling he was about to stand on his head.

"Don't crow too soon!" warned Adrian, who knew that those baffled men in the employ of the vindictive Clement would not allow them to ride away in peace, simply because they had negotiated that dangerous mountain side in safety.

Don was trying to lay out the route. He knew that in the end this might mean a whole lot for them, because before now he had discovered that Felix had emptied all the cartridges from their guns, and while he had more on his person there had been no chance to slip even a single one into the chamber of his repeating rifle; so that in case they were overhauled, they would be practically helpless in the hands of those rough riders.

And besides, Don was secretly cherishing a faint hope that those smoke signals might have been noticed away over at Keystone Ranch, resulting in the dispatching of a bunch of cowmen that way, to ascertain if anything were wrong with the three Broncho Rider Boys.

They had not gone nearly as far as Don hoped when signs from the rear told him the leaders in the rapid pursuit had also reached the level ground. Looking back he could just see them moving, as they stretched away after the fugitives; for the moonlight was not very strong.

"Keep a tight rein, Billie!" Adrian was calling every little while; for there was still danger that one of the ponies might stumble over some obstacle; or unluckily put a hoof into a gopher hole, either of which accidents must bring about a disaster, unless the rider were fully on the alert.

"I'm on deck, and don't you forget it!" would come the cheery response from the fat chum, who was making the record of his life on this night, and one that would endear him more than ever to his mates.

Don was keeping along the foot of the rise at first. He had an object in this, several of them, to tell the truth. First of all he did not like the idea of striking boldly out toward the strip of sandy desert waste that he knew lay between the mountains and the plain itself. Then he hoped to be able to run across the Keystone boys, if by good luck any of them had responded to those smoke signals sent up by the make-believe Indians, in order to communicate with their fellows further down the elevation.

Last of all, Don was hoping that when dawn began to break, which he knew would be in a very short time now, their pursuers might think to give

over the mad chase, confident that their pleasant little game had been nipped in the bud before it reached the end figured on by Clement, who was undoubtedly one of the riders back there.

Slowly the light in the east under that fragment of moon grew wider along the horizon, showing that day was at hand. Don would have felt heartily cheered by this fact only for one thing he had been suspecting for some time now.

The pursuers were steadily but surely gaining on them! They could not be more than half the distance away that had separated them at the time the level was first reached by those coming after.

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, Don remembered, and what did it avail them that Ten Spot and Wireless were able to race any of the ponies following, off their feet, when the broncho Billie bestrode was unable to keep alongside? That was what had been the matter; and it looked to anxious Don as if Billie had to keep his quirt going pretty much all the time in order to get what speed he did out of the tiring animal, now wheezing badly as she ran.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ROUNDED-UP.

When Don saw this he was conscious of a feeling of chagrin. Were they to lose out, after all their fine work, and simply because one of their ponies could not respond to the demands of the occasion?

To look back over his shoulder was not a pleasant sight, with that bunch of feathered and painted make-believe Apaches digging their moccasined heels into the sides of their saddleless ponies, and urging the animals on with kicks, and yells, and slaps from their bare hands.

Don did a queer thing about then.

Holding his bridle in one hand he reached up and slipped his gun, held upon his shoulder by the strap, over his head.

He next felt in his pockets for some ammunition, having remembered dropping several of the thirty-thirty blunt-nosed cartridges there recently. It was rather a difficult thing for him to do, attempt to load his gun in this way while galloping at headlong speed over the ground, which was utterly unfamiliar to him; but then Don was perfectly at

home on the back of a broncho, and had learned many tricks that were even harder to perform than this.

He was grimly determined that should matters come to a crisis, and he and his chums be forced to haul up, so as to face their reckless pursuers, he would not be entirely helpless.

"What's up, Don?" asked Adrian, who saw that the other was doing something not exactly on the speed programme.

"I'm trying to get a couple of cartridges in my gun, because, you know Felix, or some one else, emptied the magazines," came the reply over Don's shoulder; and as he snapped the mechanism of his rifle just then it seemed as though he might have successfully negotiated the difficult transaction.

"Good idea; and perhaps I can do the same!" called out Adrian.

"Fine!" came from Billie; at which Don made haste to exclaim:

"Don't you think to try it, Billie, not on your life! You've got your hands full right now, guiding that wabbly bronc of yours. Let your gun alone, d'ye hear?"

"Oh! don't worry!" replied the other, immediately; "because I couldn't take one of my hands off the reins now, if I wanted; and I never yet learned how to charge the magazine of my gun with my feet!"

"I'm glad of that!" said Adrian, and that closed the little talk, because they were going at such a

terrific pace that jolting up and down in the saddle made it hard to exchange remarks.

Apparently Adrian was just as fortunate as the other about managing to get his rifle in serviceable condition, for before long he uttered an exclamation that had a ring of satisfaction about it, and Don was able to draw his own conclusions.

Still they were losing ground.

In spite of everything Billie could do to urge his mount on, the animal was not capable of answering the demands. Now and then one of the others would suggest something in the hope of starting the tiring broncho into new life; but only to see the little spurt quickly die out, with the pony more wobbly than ever.

Plainly it could not keep up in this way much longer. Don realized that the end must be very near, and began looking ahead, in the hopes of spying some spot that would answer for a fort, where they might throw themselves down, and hold the make-believe Indians on the warpath at bay.

He and his chums would be perfectly justified in going to extreme measures, nor would any court in the land hold them liable; since they were supposed to look on the others as a murderous gang of half drunken Indians, who had only lately held a council of war, and in their own hearing condemned the white boys to a terrible fate, that of being burned at the stake!

Billie was unhappy.

He knew that his chums were now in a position

to do something, while in case of trouble he would be practically helpless. So he appealed to Don to help him out.

"Can't you get my gun over my head, Don, and charge it for me?" he begged, in a most piteous way; but the other had to decline the job; for it had been about as much as he could do to manage his own firearm while speeding in this way, lighted only by the treacherous moon's rays, and what little of the dawn had come in view above the eastern horizon.

"The only thing you can do, Billie," Adrian called out, seeking to soothe the disappointed one, and keep him from taking things in his own hands; "is to just hold your horses. The very second we land on our feet, which I take it will be as soon as Don here finds a place we can defend, you get busy charging your gun. And while waiting, get everything down pat in your mind, just how you're going to go about it."

"I will!" replied Billie, promptly, as though he thought the advice splendid.

Of course Adrian's main idea was to keep the other's mind employed, and in that way prevent him from getting into mischief.

It was just fine the way he and Don looked after this chum when they were in a maze of difficulties; they seemed to think that Billie was a sacred charge, and that they were to be held responsible for his coming through everything safely.

But Don was about ready to settle on where they

must stop; for the laboring pony bearing the fat boy certainly had almost reached "the end of his string."

The light was getting that strong now they could see further ahead; and thus Don made out what seemed to be a pretty good place to round-up back of. There were a number of detached rocks piled up beyond the base of the mountain, and these might answer very well for a breastwork, behind which the three boys could throw themselves.

Perhaps the make-believe Indians might come dashing boldly on, under the belief that they had nothing to fear from the empty guns of the boys; but after one or two shots had been fired, and were followed by painful wounds, there would likely follow a hurried scurrying of the bareback riders, who would hardly be willing to face deadly bullets openly for the sake of a little frolic.

"It's going to be soon now, boys!" warned Don, as he led the flight, just one horse's length ahead of Billie, who was second.

"Do you see a place we can hold?" asked Adrian, more for Billie's benefit than his own, for he felt sure that such must be the case.

"Yes, right ahead, and we'll make it in quick time now," came the encouraging response over Don's shoulder.

Billie looked up to see if he could tell where the haven of refuge might be, a dangerous thing for him to do at any time, because his whole attention was needed in managing his pony.

Hardly had he done so, however, than he uttered a whoop.

"Look! look, fellers, what's comin' out from behind that bunch of trees yonder! Cow punchers; and ten to one they're from good old Keystone Ranch! There, what did I tell you; don't I know that yell though! Hurrah! now will you be good back there?" and he even turned in his saddle to shake his fist at the wild riders, so close behind that a rope might have been used to stretch between the foremost pursuer and Adrian's broncho.

Evidently the masqueraders had discovered the enemy about as soon as Billie announced his glorious news. They were already pulling in their partly-winded animals, and turning for a mad flight.

On came the dozen riders whom the boys now recognized as friends from the ranch—Si Ketcham himself, Skinny, Magpie, Alkali, Corney, Bunch and others. They were screeching like mad as they bore down on the three lads, and getting their ropes in readiness for action, for they expected to overtake a few of the make-believe Indians, and teach them a lesson.

As they went tearing past Don and his two chums, now resting their ponies, the ranch boy made a trumpet of his hands, and shouted at the top of his voice; for with all that fearful racket it was a difficult thing to make one's self heard:

"No Indians—only Double D. boys out on a racket! They were trying to give us a scare by

pretending to have us burnt at the stake. Sic 'em, boys! Teach 'em a lesson!"

Some of them may have heard enough of what Don called to grasp the truth; and perhaps they had some means of passing it along the line. But they were heart and soul on the chase that they had now started upon.

The three boys sat there on their ponies, and viewed the lively scene with considerable humor and enjoyment. This turning of the tables agreed with them. Even Billie, who was usually a disciple of peace, must have assumed his "fighting face," for he let out a shrill yelp occasionally, as he witnessed some more than ordinarily clever work on the part of the pursuing wielders of the lariat, and acted as though he felt repaid for all his recent suffering.

"Told you so!" he cried, the tears running down his fat cheeks with all the excitement and delight which he was experiencing; "the night may be dark, but joy comes in the morning! And didn't I say the feller that laughs last has got the best of the bargain? Oh! you dandy throw! Look at Si draggin' that Six Tails on the ground a bit, just to teach him manners. Oh! now will you be good, Bud Sawyer? Honest Injun, I never was so happy in all my life. Why, everything just come our way in a heap, didn't it, boys?"

The others were also enjoying themselves pretty well. They had been kicked and prodded more or less by their late captors, just as real warpath

Apaches might have treated them, so they felt that this punishment was really the right sort of thing to hand back to the Double D. boys. Perhaps, when the latter talked over their little picnic, at some time in the future, they would not find half the satisfaction in telling the story they had expected. If one could judge from the vigorous way in which the Keystone cow-punchers went about their task of juggling the pretended Indians from their bare-back seats, and treating them harshly, all of the fun had departed from the game for Clement Derring's little band of hostiles.

By degrees the badly treated " Indians " managed to escape, some scot free, but most of them carrying reminders of their recent rough experience.

Then the happy-go-lucky broncho riders came galloping back to where Don and his two chums awaited them, anxious to learn what all this riotous demonstration meant, and just why those fellows from the rival ranch were dressed in Indian costume.

And when they heard the whole story, they would have been in a fine humor to have added to the punishment already inflicted on the masquerading cowmen, could they only have found them red-handed, with the paint still on their faces, and those brave feathers decorating their hair. But the last of the " warriors " had vanished from view; and so the Keystone riders had to take it out in galloping back and forth, shouting to the unseen enemy to come out, and get what was due them.

CHAPTER XXX.

LOOKING AHEAD—CONCLUSION.

"ARE we going home now, Don?" Billie was asking, when all of the cow punchers had gathered around them, finding no vent for their further enthusiasm; since the last of the make-believe Indians had managed to get out of sight, limping, or hanging to the neck of his bareback broncho.

"Well, we left a few of our things up at the camp, and for one I don't like to own up beat!" remarked Adrian.

"Just my idea exactly," declared Don; "and if the rest of you say so, I'll explain just where it lies to some of the boys, and they'll bring everything down here for us. For one, Billie's pony is too badly winded to make much of a run for some hours to come."

"Oh! thank you, Don," Billie chimed in with; "and that's saying a kind word for Maudie's master, too, because he's feeling like he'd been used for a punching bag. A little rest now and then, is good for horses, dogs and men. I want to just throw myself down on the ground, and stretch out for a solid two hours."

And so it was arranged. There was no difficulty

in getting half a dozen eager volunteers to undertake the job, for, since there seemed to be a slight chance that they might run across one or more of those play Indians, every fellow was anxious to be on the list.

Presently Si dispatched the chosen ones, and they went whooping over the open, carrying on like crazy beings; but then, that is the way with cowboys; they live on excitement, and welcome every chance to give tongue. It is a part of their business when driving cattle to talk to them in this strenuous way; and gradually it becomes second nature with them.

Finding a cool patch of timber not far away, the rest dismounted, staked out their ponies, and then proceeded to take things just as comfortably as possible. Billie had his wish, and to see him stretched out at full length on the grass one would fancy that the boy had been deprived of his natural sleep for many nights, instead of part of one.

Don and Adrian preferred to sit there comfortably, and chat. They had lots to talk about too, the recent events that had come their way, and also other contemplated trips that might come about in the near future.

Whenever they spoke of Clement Derring, Adrian would laugh.

"I haven't told you so before," he finally remarked; "but unless my eyes fooled me, that was him with the crow feather stuck in his hair. And Don, I saw one of our boys rope him the prettiest

ever, even when he kept ducking; and he landed on the ground with a bump that must have made him see a million stars. Wonder what old Colonel Derring's darling boy thinks of playing Indian by this time, eh? It ain't all it's cracked up to be, either. If you'd happen to see him anywhere inside of a week, chances are he'll be limping, and have his arm in a sling. But that won't cure Clement, not by a jugfull. What's bred in the bone can't be beat out of the flesh; and he's going to be as bad as they make 'em to the end of things. Some fine day perhaps you'll have a chance to take him in hand and give him what he needs; I only hope that time will hurry along."

When Adrian expressed this sincere wish he did not dream how soon it was fated to come about; but things were already shaping whereby under a different sky these old-time rivals were going to meet, face to face again, and renew the battle for supremacy that had been so long a bone of contention between them. And the reader of this book who wishes to continue his pleasant acquaintance with Don and his two chums can have that treat by securing the next volume in the Series, now published under the name of "The Broncho Rider Boys Down in Arizona; or, A Struggle for the Great Copper Lode."

There was one part of their adventure that the three friends had agreed to keep strictly to themselves. This concerned the fact that they had had help in making their escape. They let the others

infer that Billie had chewed the bonds of Don asunder, and the latter managed to liberate his two chums.

This was not done in order to secure greater praise for their clever work than they really merited; far from that, it was much against their wills that they allowed such an impression to get out; but they felt that they owed Felix Miller a debt of gratitude, that would be illy repaid if, in any way, they caused it to get to the ears of his comrades on that ill-starred expedition that he had betrayed them, in order to cancel the obligation he owed Don.

And it never did, for even Billie could keep a close tongue when he wanted to; though he always made a wry face whenever his chums referred to his abilities in the line of chewing things, for he knew to what they referred.

In due time the party that had been dispatched to the late camp returned. They had not set eyes on a single painted rider of a saddleless pony; but had gathered up a lot of stuff at the camp, which they brought back with them.

Nearly everything the boys had lost was thus recovered. In addition to this there were several hats and some other things that were never claimed by their owners; though the Keystone Ranch cowpunchers made bold to ride past the Double D. outfit, wearing hats that the original owner could easily have recognized, but did not dare claim, lest it get him into trouble.

And that ended the hunt in the foothills and mountains.

If it had not lasted quite as long as was originally intended, things had fairly "hummed" every minute of the time, and the three boys were satisfied. Perhaps Billie had some lingering regrets, for on the way home he was seen to look unusually serious, for him. Adrian guessed what was on the other's mind.

"Still harping on that grizzly, ain't you, Billie?" he said, laughingly.

"Well, to tell you the honest truth," replied the other, with a disappointed expression on his rosy face, "I am. You see things were coming all my way so fast, that I just know I'd have knocked over the biggest old he-bear that ever was heard tell of, if only I could a sighted him. Now mebbe I'll never get the chance again, and that makes me sad."

"Cheer up," said Adrian, "it's never so dark but that there's dawn ahead; and right now I happen to know our good chum Don here, has got a little excursion in mind, to which he means to invite you and me; and Billie, perhaps there's going to be a chance for you to rub up against a real live grizzly then and there. And if you don't, why, I'm going to try and coax both of you to go with me up into Wyoming, to see the sights there, and take a look over my ranch property, which I'm beginning to believe ain't taken care of as it should be."

"Oh! you make me smile again, Adrian, and I'm

going to just live in hopes," the other went on to say, enthusiastically. "But before that time I do hope I've managed to break in that bad tempered broncho, Jupiter; because I'll never give up trying it as long as I've got a neck left; you hear me?"

"You talk as if you were a cat, with nine lives, Billie," laughed Don, though secretly pleased to hear such language; for when Billie had first come to them, both he and his other chum were of the opinion that he would be like putty, and never have a mind of his own; they knew better now—if Billie resembled putty at all, it was the kind that has been on a window for about eleven years, and become as hard as so much flint.

With the other things brought down by those who had ridden up to the late camp was the skin of the big panther Billie had slain.

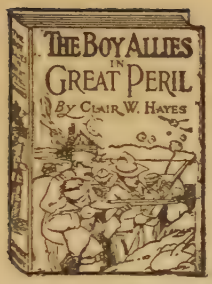
After the story of the hunt was told it could be noticed that Alkali, Bunch and most of the other boys who were along rather looked Billie over, as thought they had begun to revise their opinion of the fat boy. He had been so much in evidence on this trip, and seemed able to look out for himself so well, that they began to conclude that Billie was no longer a tenderfoot and a greenhorn, at whom all manner of fun could be poked, without his resenting it. After this, when they were talking about those who could *do* things, Billie must be reckoned with.

He had made good, after the cowboy and Indian method, by accomplishing things.

Don never really saw Felix Miller again, for his father had some sort of a row with Colonel Derring, and they parted, so that the Millers cleared out of that neighborhood; but a long time afterward Don did receive a few lines from a mining camp down in Mexico, stating that the elder Miller was acting as superintendent for the American owners, and that his right hand man was Felix. So, though they never heard about him again, still both Don and Adrian felt sure that in some way the boy's eyes had been opened to the difference between his life and that of Don, at the time the latter forgave him for his theft, and gave him the bugle he had really stolen.

That Billie did actually conquer the stubborn spirit of the handsome pony Mr. Mackay had given him was evident, for inside of two weeks he was riding an entirely new broncho, a spirited beast with a record for speed, yet which seemed to recognize the stout boy as master; and answered to the name of Jupiter.

THE END.



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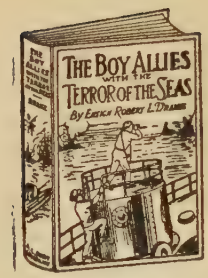

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